

## THE EPISTLE TO YEMEN

---

Not long after his arrival in Egypt in 1167 C.E., Maimonides was appointed physician to the ruler of the country and his entourage. Maimonides was sought out by the Jewish community not only for medical treatment, but also for guidance and help in its private and communal affairs. Such was his reputation that a request for advice soon came to him from Jacob ben Nathanel al-Fayyumi on behalf of the Jews of Yemen. There too a fanatical Muslim movement was threatening the existence of the Jewish community. The movement had been started in 1150 by the Shi'ite Ali ibn Mahdi and was now attempting to force the conversion of all non-Moslems under his son 'Abd al-Nabi' ibn Mahdi.

Jacob raised several issues in his request for advice. What was the significance of the community's suffering? How should they respond to a convert who had become a missionary for Islam and claimed that the Torah itself confirmed the prophethood of Muhammad? What should they make of the claim of another individual to be the Messiah, come to rescue them from their persecutors? Could the date of the Messiah's coming be predicted by astrology?

Maimonides gave his ruling on all these questions in his *Epistle to Yemen* of 1172, so phrasing his answers that the community might be encouraged to avoid succumbing either to the oppressor or to messianic delusions.

# I

**T**o the honored, great, and holy master and teacher, Jacob,<sup>1</sup> wise and genial, dear and revered sage, son of the honored, great, and holy master and teacher, Nathanel Fayyumi, distinguished prince of Yemen, president of its congregations, leader of its communities, may the spirit of God rest upon him, and to all his associates and to all the scholars of the communities of Yemen, may the Lord keep and protect them. From a loving friend who never saw him but knows him only by reputation, Moses ben Maimon ben Joseph ben Isaac ben Obadiah<sup>2</sup> of blessed memory.

Just as plants bear testimony to the existence of roots, and waters are evidence of the excellence of the springs, so has the firm shoot developed from the roots of truth and righteousness, and a huge river has gushed forth from the spring of mercy in the land of Yemen, to water therewith all gardens and to make flowers blossom.<sup>3</sup> It flows gently on to satisfy the needs of the weary and thirsty in the arid places; wayfarers and folks from the isles of the sea satisfy their needs with it. Consequently, it has been proclaimed from Spain to Babylonia, from one end of heaven to the other: *Ho, all who are thirsty, come for water* [Isa. 55:1].<sup>4</sup> Men of business and traffic unanimously declare to all inquirers that they have found in the land of Yemen a beautiful and delightful plantation and a rich pasture with faithful shepherds wherein every lean one shall wax fat. They strengthen the indigent with bread and greet the opulent with hospitality and generosity; even the Sabeian caravans look forward to their benevolence.<sup>5</sup> Their hands are stretched out to every passerby, and their homes are wide open to every traveler. With them all find tranquillity; sorrow and sighing flee. They continually study the Law of Moses, walk in the way of R. Ashi,<sup>6</sup> pursue justice, repair the breach, uphold the principles of Torah, bring back the stray people of God with encouraging words, observe the religious ceremonies punctiliously in their communities. *There is no breaching and no sortie, and no wailing in our streets* [Ps. 144:14].

Blessed be the Lord, that He has suffered Jews to remain who observe the Torah and obey its injunctions in the most distant peninsulas, as we were graciously assured through Isaiah, His servant, for it is to you people of Yemen he was alluding when he prophesied: *From the end of the earth we hear singing* [Isa. 24:16].<sup>7</sup>

When we departed from the West *to gaze upon the beauty of the Lord, to frequent His temple* [Ps. 27:4],<sup>8</sup> I learned that he<sup>9</sup> passed away. May God bestow His justice and goodness upon him. May he enter unto peace and rest upon his bed. May He send him angels of mercy. May he rest and rise up for his reward at the end of days. This, my dearly beloved friend, is proof that God was pleased with his deeds, and that He will compensate him doubly and grant him peace, that you are his son, and have risen in his place to promote religion and observance, to further justice and righteousness, to obey His precepts and laws, and to abide by His covenant. May the Lord your God be with you as He was with your fathers. May He not forsake nor abandon you. May He give you deep understanding to judge His people. *May His words never depart from your mouth, nor the mouth of your children* [Isa. 59:21], as He declared. May you follow your father as leader of His people, and may God grant that your fame be greater than his.

When your letter, my dearly beloved friend, arrived in Egypt, all were pleased to hear of it and delighted to look at it. It bore witness that you are one of the ministers of the Lord who dwell in His domain and are pitched at His standard, that you pursue the study of the Torah, love its laws, and watch at its gates. May the Lord divulge its secrets unto you, and stock you abundantly with the knowledge of its treasures, make its crown your chief crown, place its necklace upon your neck. May its words be a lamp unto your feet and a light unto your path, and may you become celebrated through them. *And all the peoples of the earth shall see that the Lord's name is proclaimed over you, and they shall stand in fear of you* [Deut. 28:10].<sup>10</sup>

As for the information in your letter, my dear friend, that you heard some of our coreligionists in the Diaspora—may the Lord keep and protect them—praise and extol me very highly and compare me with the illustrious *geonim*, they have spoken thus about me out of mere tenderness for me, and written about me out of pure goodness.<sup>11</sup> However, listen to a word fitly spoken by me, and give no heed to the

sayings of others. I am one of the humblest scholars of Spain whose prestige is low in exile. I am always dedicated to my duties, but have not attained to the learning of my forebears, for evil days and hard times have overtaken us and we have not lived in tranquillity; we have labored without finding rest. How can the Law become lucid to a fugitive from city to city, from country to country? I have everywhere pursued the reapers and gathered ears of grain, both the solid and the full, as well as the shriveled and the thin. Only recently have I found a home.<sup>12</sup> Were it not for the help of God, as we are told by our ancestors, I would not have gathered the little I have, from which I continually draw.<sup>13</sup>

Now, the princely priest R. Shelomo, my friend and disciple,<sup>14</sup> who, as you write, indulges in hyperboles in praise of me and speaks extravagantly in appreciation of me, exaggerates unreasonably because he wants to, and waxes enthusiastic because he loves and cherishes me. May the Lord guard him, so that he is like a blooming vineyard, and may he return to us hale and hearty.

The other matters in your letter that you wish me to speak of, I deem it best to write in the Arabic tongue and idiom,<sup>15</sup> so that all men, women, and children can read it with ease,<sup>16</sup> for it is right that your membership be enabled to understand the contents of the reply.

You write of the affair of the rebel leader in Yemen<sup>17</sup> who decreed forced apostasy of the Jews, and compelled all the Jewish inhabitants in all the places he had subdued to desert their religion, just as the Berbers had obliged them to do in the Maghreb.<sup>18</sup> This report has broken our backs and astounded and dumbfounded the whole of our community, and rightly so. For these are evil tidings, and *both ears of everyone who hears about it will tingle* [1 Sam. 3:11 and 2 Kings 21:12]. Indeed, our hearts are weakened, our minds are confused, and our strength wanes because of the dire misfortunes that have come upon us in the form of the religious persecution in the two ends of the world, the East and West, *so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on the other side* [Josh. 8:22].<sup>19</sup> It is of the like of this dreadful occasion the prophet prayed and interceded in our behalf: *I said, "Oh, Lord God, refrain! How will Jacob survive? He is so small"* [Amos 7:5].<sup>20</sup> Indeed, this is a subject that no religious person dare

take lightly,<sup>21</sup> nor anyone put aside who believes faithfully in Moses. There is no doubt that these are the messianic travails<sup>22</sup> concerning which the sages invoked God that they be spared seeing and experiencing them. The prophets trembled when they envisioned them, as Isaiah reacted: *My heart pants, fearfulness affrights me; the twilight I longed for has been turned into trembling* [Isa. 21:4].<sup>23</sup> And the divine exclamation in the Torah expresses sympathy with those who will experience them, by saying: *Alas, who shall live when God does this!* [Num. 24:23].<sup>24</sup>

When you write that the hearts of some people have turned, uncertainty befalls them, and their beliefs are weakened, while others have not lost faith and not become disquieted, we have a divine premonition of it through Daniel. For he predicted that the long stay of Israel in exile and the continuous persecution would cause many to drift away from our faith, to have misgivings, or go astray, because they were to witness our feebleness and note the triumph of our adversaries and their dominion over us, while still others would neither oscillate in their belief, nor be shaken in their convictions. He states: *Many shall purify themselves, and make themselves white, and be refined; but the wicked shall do wickedly; and none of the wicked shall understand* [Dan. 12:10].<sup>25</sup> Further, he explains that even men of understanding and intelligence, who would have brooked milder misfortunes and remained firm in their belief in God and in His servant Moses, will yield to distrust and will err when they are visited by sterner and harsher afflictions. Only a few will remain pure in faith, for he adds: *And some of them that are wise shall stumble* [Dan. 11:35].<sup>26</sup>

And now, brethren, it is essential that all of you give attention and consideration to what I am going to point out to you.<sup>27</sup> Teach it to your women and children, so that their faith, to the extent that it has become enfeebled and impaired, may be strengthened, and that enduring certainty may be reestablished in their hearts. It is—may the Lord deliver you and me—that ours is the true and divine religion, revealed to us through Moses, chief of the former as well as of the later prophets.<sup>28</sup> By means of it God has distinguished us from the rest of mankind, as He declares: *Yet it was to your fathers that the Lord was drawn in His love for them, so that He chose you, their lineal descendants, from among all the peoples* [Deut. 10:15]. This choice was not made thanks

to our merits, but was rather an act of grace, on account of our ancestors who were cognizant of God and obedient to Him, as He states: *It is not because you are the most numerous of peoples that the Lord set His heart on you and chose you—indeed, you are the smallest of peoples* [Deut. 7:7].<sup>29</sup>

Since God has singled us out by His laws and precepts, and our preeminence over the others was manifested in His rules and statutes, as Scripture says in narrating God's mercies to us: *What great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?* [Deut. 4:8];<sup>30</sup> all the nations, instigated by envy and impiety, rose up against us in anger, and all the kings of the earth, motivated by injustice and enmity, applied themselves to persecute us. They wanted to thwart God, but He will not be thwarted. Ever since the time of revelation<sup>31</sup> every despot or rebel ruler, be he violent or ignoble, has made it his first aim and his final purpose to destroy our Law, and to vitiate our religion by means of the sword, by violence, or by brute force. Such were Amalek, Sisera, Sennacherib, Nebuchadnezzar, Titus, Hadrian,<sup>32</sup> and others like them.

The second class consists of the most intelligent and educated among the nations, like the Syrians, Persians, and Greeks.<sup>33</sup> They also endeavor to demolish our Law and to abrogate it by means of arguments that they invent and controversies that they institute. They seek to render the Law ineffectual and to wipe out every trace of it with their compositions, just as the despots try to do with their swords. But neither the one nor the other shall succeed. For a long time ago the assurance was given us through Isaiah that every tyrant who seeks to triumph over our Law and annihilate it by weapons of war will be demolished by the Lord so that they will have no effect. This is a metaphorical way of saying that his efforts will be of no avail. Likewise every disputant who will attempt to demonstrate the falsity of our Law, the Lord will shatter his arguments and prove them absurd, untenable, and ineffective. This is the divine promise: *No weapon formed against you shall succeed, and every tongue that contends with you at law you shall defeat* [Isa. 54:17].<sup>34</sup> Although both of these persuade themselves that this is a structure that can be demolished and lay plans to undermine its firmly established foundations, they only increase their pain and toil. The structure remains as firm as ever, while the Constant<sup>35</sup>



mocks and derides them because they endeavor with their feeble intelligence to achieve something no human being can undertake. The prophet,<sup>36</sup> describing their efforts and God's scorn of them, says: *Let us break the cords of their yoke, shake off their ropes from us! He who is enthroned in heaven laughs; the Lord mocks at them* [Ps. 2:3-4].<sup>37</sup> We have been incessantly distressed and harassed by these two parties all through the epoch of our political independence, and in part during the period of our dispersion.<sup>38</sup>

After that a new class arose that combined the two methods, namely, conquest, controversy, and dispute<sup>39</sup> into one, because it believed that this procedure would be more effective in wiping out every trace of the community. It therefore resolved to lay claim to prophecy and to found a new Law, contrary to our divine religion, and to contend that it also came from God, like the true claim. Thus doubts will be generated and confusion will be created, since one is opposed to the other and both supposedly emanated from one god, and it will lead to the destruction of both religions. This is a remarkable plan contrived by a person who is envious and malicious, who will strive to kill his enemy and remain alive, and if he cannot achieve this, he will devise a scheme whereby they both will be slain.<sup>40</sup>

The first to institute this plan was Jesus the Nazarene,<sup>41</sup> may his bones be ground to dust. He was Jewish because his mother was a Jewess although his father was a gentile, and our principle is that a child born of a Jewess and a gentile or a slave, is legitimate.<sup>42</sup> Only figuratively do we call him an illegitimate child.<sup>43</sup> He impelled people to believe that he was sent by God to clarify perplexities in the Torah, and that he was the Messiah predicted by each and every prophet. His purpose was to interpret the Torah in a fashion that would lead to its total annulment, to the abolition of its commandments, and to the violation of all its prohibitions. The sages of blessed memory, aware of his objective before his reputation spread among our people, meted out a fitting punishment.<sup>44</sup> Daniel had already alluded to him when he presaged the downfall of a wicked and heretical Jew who would endeavor to destroy the Law, claim prophecy for himself, make pretense to miracles, and allege that he was the Messiah, as is written: *The children of the impudent among your people shall make bold to claim prophecy, but they shall fall* [Dan. 11:14].<sup>45</sup>

Quite some time later, a religion, which is traced to him by the descendants of Esau, gained popularity.<sup>46</sup> Although this was the aim he hoped to realize, he had no impact on Israel, as neither groups nor individuals became unsettled in their beliefs. His inconsistencies were transparent to everyone, as was also his failure and disappointment when he fell into our hands with the well-known end.<sup>47</sup> After him the Madman<sup>48</sup> arose, who emulated the precursor who had paved the way for him. But he added the further objective of procuring rule and obedience,<sup>49</sup> and he invented his notorious religion.

All of these men wish to liken themselves to the divine religion.<sup>50</sup> But only a simpleton who lacks knowledge of both establishments will liken the divine institutions to human contrivances. The difference between our religion and the other denominations that liken themselves to us is like the difference between the living, rational individual and the statue skillfully molded out of marble, wood, silver, or gold that looks like a man.<sup>51</sup> A person ignorant of divine wisdom or of God's work, when he sees the statue that superficially resembles a man in its contours, form, features, and color, believes that its structure is like the constitution of a man, because he lacks the knowledge of the inner organization of both. But the informed person who knows the interior of both, knows that the internal composition of the statue betrays no skillful workmanship at all, whereas the inward parts of man are truly marvelously made, a testimony to the wisdom of the Creator. The prolongation of the nerves in the muscles and their ramifications, the branching out of the sinews and their intersections, and the network of their ligaments and their manner of growth, the articulations of the bones and the joints, the pulsating and nonpulsating blood vessels and their ramifications, the setting of the limbs into one another, the uncovered and covered parts, every one of them is in proportion, in form, and in its proper place.

Likewise a person ignorant of the secrets of the revealed books and the inner significance of our Law will be led to believe that our religion has something in common with the established confession if he makes a comparison between the two. For he will find that in the Torah there are prohibitions and commandments, and there are prohibitions and commandments in the others; the Torah contains positive and negative precepts, rewards, and punishments, and the others contain negative



and positive commandments, rewards, and punishments. Yet if he could only fathom the inner meanings, he would realize that the essence of the Torah lies in the deeper meaning of its positive and negative precepts, every one of which will aid man in his striving after perfection and remove every impediment to the attainment of excellence. They will enable the masses and the elite to acquire moral and intellectual qualities, each according to his ability. Thus, the godly community becomes preeminent, reaching a twofold perfection.<sup>52</sup> By the first I mean man's leading his life in this world under the most agreeable and congenial conditions. The second will constitute the gain of the intelligibles,<sup>53</sup> each in accordance with his native powers. The pretentious religions contain matters that have no inner meaning, only imitations, simulations, and copies by which the inventors aimed to glorify themselves and indulge in the fancy that they are similar to so-and-so. However, their shameful action is an open secret to the learned. They became an object of derision and ridicule,<sup>54</sup> just as one laughs and scoffs at a monkey when it tries to imitate the actions of human beings.

This was predicted by the divinely inspired prophet Daniel, according to whom, in some future time, it would happen.<sup>55</sup> Sometime later a person will appear with a religion similar to the true one, with a book and oral communications, who will arrogantly pretend that God has vouchsafed him a revelation, and that he held converse with Him, and other extravagant claims. In his description of the rise of the Arab kingdom after the Byzantine Empire, he compared the appearance of the Madman and his victories over the Byzantines, Persians, and Greeks with a horn that grew and became long and strong. This is clearly indicated in a verse that can be understood by the masses as well as by the select few. Since this interpretation is borne out by the facts of history, no other meaning can be given to the following verse: *I considered the horns, and, behold, another little horn came among them before which three of the first horns were plucked up by the roots; and, behold, in this horn were eyes like the eyes of a human, and a mouth speaking big things* [Dan. 7:8]. Now consider how remarkably apt the symbolism is. He says that he saw a small horn that was going up. When it became longer, even marvelously longer, it cast three horns down before it, and behold, the horn had two eyes similar to the eyes

of a human, and a mouth speaking big things. This obviously alludes to the person who will found a new religion similar to the divine religion and make claim to a revelation and to prophecy. He will produce much talk and will endeavor to alter this Torah and abolish it, as He states: *And he shall seek to change the seasons and the law* [Dan. 7:25].

But God informed him that He would destroy this person, notwithstanding his greatness and his long endurance, together with the remaining adherents of his predecessors. For the three parties that warred against us will ultimately perish: the one that sought to overpower us with the sword, the second that claimed it had arguments against us, and the third that claims to have a religion similar to ours. Though they shall appear to be triumphant for a while, and be in the ascendancy for a longer or shorter period of time, they shall neither last nor endure. We have a continuous divine assurance that whenever a decree of apostasy is passed against us and wrath breaks out, God will ultimately terminate it. When King David, inspired by the Holy Spirit and speaking in the name of the community, reflected on how many peoples ruled over it in the past, and how many trials and tribulations they had undergone from the beginning of their history, and nevertheless were not exterminated, he exclaimed: *Since my youth they have often assailed me, but they have never overcome me* [Ps. 129:2].

My brethren, you know that in the time of the wicked Nebuchadnezzar the Jews were compelled to worship idols, and none was spared save Hananiah, Mishael, and Azariah.<sup>56</sup> Ultimately God destroyed him, and put an end to his laws, and the religion of truth came back into its own. Similarly, during the Second Commonwealth, when the wicked Greek rulers gained control, they instituted severe persecution against Israel in order to abolish the Torah. The Jews were compelled to profane the Sabbath and forbidden to practice circumcision. Every Jew was forced to write on his garment, "I do not have a portion in the Lord God of Israel," and also to engrave these words on the horns of his ox and then to plow with it.<sup>57</sup> Finally, God simultaneously brought their empire and their laws to an end, after a lapse of fifty-two years.<sup>58</sup> The sages of blessed memory frequently allude to persecutions in the following manner: "Once the wicked government passed such and such a decree of persecution,"<sup>59</sup> or "they decreed thus and so."<sup>60</sup> After a while God would make the decree null and void by

destroying the power that issued it. It was this observation that led the rabbis of blessed memory to affirm that persecutions are of short duration.<sup>61</sup>

Indeed God assured our father Jacob that although his children would be humbled and overcome by the nations, they and not the nations would survive and would endure. He declares: *Your descendants shall be as the dust of the earth* [Gen. 28:14],<sup>62</sup> that is to say, although they will be abased like the dust that is trodden under foot, they will ultimately emerge triumphant and victorious. And, as the simile implies, just as the dust settles finally upon him who tramples upon it and remains after him, so will Israel outlive its oppressors.<sup>63</sup> The prophet Isaiah predicted that during its exile various peoples will succeed in their endeavor to vanquish Israel and lord over them, but that ultimately God will come to Israel's assistance and put a stop to their woes and afflictions. He says: *A harsh prophecy has been announced to me: "The betrayer is betraying, the ravager ravaging. Advance Elam! Lay siege, Media! I have put an end to all her sighing"* [Isa. 21:2].<sup>64</sup> The Lord has given us assurance through His prophets that we are indestructible and imperishable, and we will always continue to be a preeminent community. As it is impossible for God to cease to exist, so is our destruction and disappearance from the world unthinkable. He declares: *For I am the Lord—I have not changed; and you are the children of Jacob—you have not ceased to be* [Mal. 3:6]. Similarly, He has avowed and assured us that it is unimaginable that He will reject us entirely even if we disobey Him and disregard His behests, as He avers: *If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares the Lord* [Jer. 31:37].<sup>65</sup> In fact, this very promise was previously given through Moses our Teacher in the Torah. It reads: *Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God* [Lev. 26:44].<sup>66</sup>

Put your trust in these true texts of Scripture, brethren, and be not dismayed by the succession of persecutions or the enemy's ascendancy over us, or the weakness of our people. These trials are designed to test and purify us, so that only the saints and the pious men of the

pure and undefiled lineage of Jacob will adhere to our religion and remain within the fold, as has been stated: *Anyone who invokes the name of Lord shall be among the survivors* [Joel 3:5].<sup>67</sup> This statement makes it clear that they are not numerous, and that they are the descendants of those who were present at Mount Sinai,<sup>68</sup> witnessed the divine revelation, entered into the covenant of God, and took upon themselves to do and obey, declaring, *we will do, and obey* [Exod. 24:7].<sup>69</sup> They obligated themselves and their descendants, by saying: *for us and our children* [for]ever [Deut. 29:28].<sup>70</sup> God has given assurance—He is an adequate guarantor—and informed them that not only did all the persons who were present at the Sinaitic revelation believe in the prophecy of Moses and in his Law, but that their descendants would likewise do so until the end of time. He declares: *I will come to you in a thick cloud, in order that the people may hear when I speak with you and so trust you ever after* [Exod. 19:9]. Consequently, let everyone know who spurns the religion that was revealed at that theophany that he is not an offspring of the folk that witnessed it. This is what the sages of Israel of blessed memory said of those who entertain scruples concerning the divine message: They are not the scions of the race that was present at Mount Sinai.<sup>71</sup> May God guard me and you from doubt, and banish from our midst confusion and suspicion that lead to it and ensnare in it.

Now, all my fellow countrymen in the Diaspora, it behooves you to hearten one another, the elders to guide the youth, and the leaders to direct the masses. Gain the assent of your community<sup>72</sup> to the Truth that is immutable and unchangeable, and to the following postulates of the true faith that shall never fail.<sup>73</sup> God is one in a unique sense of the term.<sup>74</sup> And Moses, His prophet and spokesman,<sup>75</sup> is the greatest and most perfect of all the seers. To him was vouchsafed the knowledge of God, what has never been vouchsafed to any prophet before him, nor will it be in the future. The entire Torah from beginning to end<sup>76</sup> was spoken by God to Moses, of whom it is said: *With him I speak mouth to mouth* [Num. 12:8].<sup>77</sup> It will never be abrogated or superseded, neither supplemented nor abridged. Never shall it be supplanted by another divine law containing positive or negative duties. Keep the revelation at Mount Sinai well in mind in accordance with the divine precept to perpetuate the memory and not to forget this

occasion. He enjoined us to teach it to our children so that they grow up knowing it, as He—exalted be the Speaker—says: *But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind so long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children: The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb [Deut. 4:9–10].*<sup>78</sup>

It is imperative, my fellow Jews, that you make this great spectacle of the revelation appeal to the imagination of your children. Proclaim at public gatherings its nobility and its momentousness. For it is the pivot of our religion and the proof that demonstrates its veracity. Evaluate this phenomenon in its true importance, as God pointed out its significance in the verse: *You have but to inquire about bygone ages that came before you, ever since God created man on earth, from one end of heaven to the other: has anything as grand as this ever happened, or has its like ever been known? Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire?* [Deut. 4:32–33]. Remember, brethren, that this great, incomparable, and unique covenant and faith is attested by the best of evidence. For never before or since has a whole nation heard the speech of God or beheld His splendor. This was done only to confirm us in the faith, so that nothing can change it, and to reach a degree of certainty that will sustain us in these trying times of fierce persecution and absolute tyranny, as He says: *For God has come only in order to test you* [Exod. 20:17].<sup>79</sup> It means that God has revealed Himself thus to give you strength to withstand all future trials. Now, brethren, do not slip or err, be steadfast in your religion and persevere in your faith and its duties.

Long ago Solomon<sup>80</sup> compared our community with a beautiful woman having a perfect figure, marred by no defect, in the verse: *Every part of you is fair, my darling; there is no blemish in you* [Song of Songs 4:7].<sup>81</sup> He further depicted the adherents of other religions and faiths, who strive to entice us and win us over to their convictions as beguiling seducers who lure virtuous women for their lewd purposes. Similarly they seek devices to trap us into embracing their religions, and subscribing to their doctrines. To those who endeavor to decoy her into avowing the superiority of their creed, he in his wisdom answered in



the name of the community: "Why do you take hold of me, can you confer upon me something like the felicity of the two companies?" She challenges them, saying: "If you can furnish me with something like the theophany at Sinai, in which the camp of Israel faced the camp of the divine presence, then I shall espouse your doctrine."<sup>82</sup> This is metaphorically expressed in the verse: *Turn back, turn back, O maid of Shulem! Turn back, turn back, that we may gaze upon you. "Why will you gaze at the Shulammitite in the Mahanaim dance?"* [Song of Songs 7:1]<sup>83</sup> *Shulammitite* signifies the perfect one; the *Mahanaim dance* the joy of the revelation at Mt. Sinai that was shared by the camp<sup>84</sup> of Israel, as He states: *Moses led the people out of the camp toward God* [Exod. 19:17],<sup>85</sup> and the camp of God, as He explained saying: *God's chariots are myriads upon myriads, thousands upon thousands* [Ps. 68:18].<sup>86</sup>

Note well the wisdom and the deep significance of the verse. The fourfold occurrence of the word *return* is an allusion to the four empires, each of which has endeavored to coerce us to abandon our faith and to join it. Now we are living under the last of them.<sup>87</sup> God has warned us in the Torah that they would draw us to accept their faith, for He says: *There you will serve man-made gods of wood and stone* [Deut. 4:28].<sup>88</sup> However, even then it will not be general throughout the world,<sup>89</sup> and God will never deprive us of His Law, as He assured us: *Since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring* [Deut. 31:21].<sup>90</sup> Indeed, Isaiah, the herald of national redemption, has explained that the sign between us and Him, and the token that proves that we are indestructible lies in the perpetuation of God's Torah and His words among us: *And this shall be My covenant with them, said the Lord: My spirit which is upon you, and the words which I have placed in your mouth shall not be absent from your mouth, nor from the mouth of your children, nor from the mouth of your children's children—said the Lord—from now on, for all time* [Isa. 59:21]. Our nation speaks with pride of the persecutions it has suffered, and the sore tribulations it has endured, as he states: *It is for Your sake that we are slain all day long, that we are regarded as sheep to be slaughtered* [Ps. 44:23].<sup>91</sup> The rabbis remark in Midrash H̄azita<sup>92</sup> that the expression *it is for Your sake* alludes to the generations that undergo



persecution. Let these persons exult who suffer dire misfortunes, are deprived of their riches, are forced into exile, and lose their belongings. For the bearing of these hardships is a source of glory and a great achievement in the sight of God. Whoever is visited by these calamities is like a burnt offering upon the altar.<sup>93</sup> It is said to them: *Dedicate yourselves to the Lord this day . . . that He may bestow a blessing upon you today* [Exod. 32:29].<sup>94</sup>

It therefore behooves the victims of this persecution to escape and flee to the desert and wilderness, and not to consider separation from family or loss of wealth.<sup>95</sup> For they are a slight sacrifice and a paltry offering due to God, King of kings, possessor of all things, *this honored and awesome Name, the Lord your God* [Deut. 28:58].<sup>96</sup> God may be trusted to compensate you well in this world and in the world-to-come. Thus we have found that the godly and pious folk who are animated by a desire to get acquainted with the truth and those who are engaged in its pursuit, rush to the divine religion, and wend their way from the most distant parts to the homes of scholars.<sup>97</sup> They seek to gain increased insight into the Law, that they may gain reward from God. How much more is it one's duty to run for the entire Torah! We know that when a man finds it arduous to gain a livelihood in one country, he emigrates to another. It is all the more incumbent upon one who is restricted in the practice of the divine religion to depart for another place. If he finds it impossible to leave that locality for the time being, he must not become careless and indulge in the desecration of the Sabbath and the dietary laws on the assumption that he is exempt from all religious obligations.<sup>98</sup> It is the eternally inescapable duty of everyone belonging to the stock of Jacob to abide by the Law. Nay, he exposes himself to punishment for the violation of each and every positive or negative precept. Let no one conclude that he may freely disregard the less important ceremonies without liability to penalty because he has under duress committed some major sins.<sup>99</sup> For Jeroboam son of Nebat, may his bones be ground to dust,<sup>100</sup> was chastised not only for the sin of worshiping the calves and inciting the Israelites to do the same, but also for his failure to construct a booth on the Feast of Tabernacles.<sup>101</sup> This is one of the fundamentals of our religion. Understand it aright, teach it, and apply the principle widely.

## II

You mention that the apostate<sup>102</sup> has misled people to believe that *bm'd m'd* is the Madman,<sup>103</sup> or that in the same way *He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2]<sup>104</sup> alludes to him, or similarly, that *a prophet from among your own people* [Deut. 18:15]<sup>105</sup> refers to him, or likewise his promise to Ishmael: *I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:20].<sup>106</sup> These arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating. It is not enough to declare that they are altogether feeble; nay, to cite them as proofs is ridiculous and absurd in the extreme. Neither the untutored multitudes, nor the apostates themselves who delude others with them, believe in them or entertain any illusions about them. Their sole purpose in citing these verses is to win favor in the eyes of the gentiles by demonstrating that they believe the statement of the Koran that Muhammad was mentioned in the Torah. But the Muslims themselves do not accept these arguments; they do not admit them nor cite them, because they are manifestly fallacious. Inasmuch as the Muslims could not find a single proof in the entire Bible, nor a reference, or possible allusion to their prophet that they could utilize, they are compelled to accuse us, saying: "You have altered the text of the Torah, and expunged every trace of the name of Muhammad therefrom."<sup>107</sup> They could find nothing stronger than this ignominious argument, the falsity of which is easily demonstrated to one and all by the fact that the Torah had been translated into Syriac, Greek, Persian, and Latin hundreds of years before the appearance of the "prepostle,"<sup>108</sup> and by the fact that it is an unbroken tradition<sup>109</sup> in the East and the West, with the result that no differences in the text exist at all, not even in the vocalization, for they are all correct. Nor do any differences affecting the meaning exist.<sup>110</sup> Only the absence of any allusion to him in the Torah compelled them to rely on these weak proofs.

The phrase *a great nation* implies neither prophecy nor a Law, but merely large numbers and no more,<sup>111</sup> just as He says of the idolaters *nations greater and more numerous than you* [Deut. 11:23].<sup>112</sup> Similarly, the phrase *bm'd m'd* simply signifies *exceedingly*. If the allusion in the phrase were intended to *that one*, it would read *and I shall bless him bm'd m'd*,<sup>113</sup> so that whoever likes to hang on a spider's web might

then declare that it means: "I shall bless him that that one may be his seed." But since *bm'd m'd* follows *I will make him numerous*, it can only denote an extravagant increase in numbers.<sup>114</sup>

When God spoke to Abraham He made it amply clear that all the blessings that He promised and all his children to whom He will reveal the Law and whom He will make the Chosen People—all this is meant only for the seed of Isaac.<sup>115</sup> Ishmael is regarded as an adjunct and appendage in the blessings of Isaac, for He says: *As for the son of the slave-woman, I will make a nation of him, too, for he is your seed* [Gen. 21:13].<sup>116</sup> He clearly explains in this verse that Isaac holds a primary position and Ishmael a subordinate place.<sup>117</sup> He announces: *For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you* [Gen. 21:12] and He ignores Ishmael entirely. The meaning is that although the seed of Ishmael will be vast in numbers, it will be neither preeminent nor the object of divine favor, nor distinguished by the attainment of excellence by which one may become famed or celebrated. Nay, your merit will become known by your illustrious offspring, the seed that will issue from Isaac. The literal meaning of *shall be continued* is *shall be called*, as in the verse: *in them may my name be recalled, and the names of my fathers Abraham and Isaac* [Gen. 48:16];<sup>118</sup> the sense is "you will become famed and celebrated through them." He further stated regarding Isaac that one of the blessings of which He assured Abraham would be that God's Torah and religion would be vouchsafed to his children, as He promised: *I will be their God* [Gen. 17:8].<sup>119</sup> Thus He singled out Isaac to the exclusion of Ishmael in all these blessings. He singled out him and not Ishmael in the religion, as He states: *But My covenant I will maintain with Isaac* [Gen. 17:21],<sup>120</sup> after saying regarding Ishmael: *I hereby bless him* [Gen. 17:20]. He made it clear through Isaac that Jacob was singled out in all this to the exclusion of Esau, for Isaac said to him: *May He grant the blessing of Abraham to you* [Gen. 28:4].<sup>121</sup> In a word, it is clear from the verses in the Torah that the divine covenant made with Abraham to grant the sublime Law to his descendants referred exclusively to those who belonged to the stock of both Isaac and Jacob. Hence the prophet<sup>122</sup> expresses his gratitude to God for the covenant *that He made with Abraham, swore to Isaac, and confirmed in a decree for Jacob, for Israel, as an eternal covenant* [Ps. 105:9–10 and 1 Chron. 16:16–17].

It is also important that you know that the name of the prophet that the Ishmaelites think is written in the Torah, *bm'd m'd*, to which the apostates cling,<sup>123</sup> is not *MHMD* but *AHMD*. So it is explicitly stated: "They find him mentioned in the Torah and the Gospels;"<sup>124</sup> "his name is *AHMD*."<sup>125</sup> The numerical value of *bm'd m'd* is not equal to this name, which is supposed to be written in the Torah.<sup>126</sup>

His argument from the phrase *he appeared from Mount Paran* is not valid. *Appeared* is past tense. Had it employed the future tense "he will appear from Mount Paran," the impostors might have had something to hang onto. However, the use of the past tense indicates that it is an event that has taken place, namely, it describes the revelation at Mount Sinai: It did not descend suddenly like a thunderbolt, but came down gently, manifesting itself gradually first from the top of one mountain, then from another, until it came to rest on Sinai. Hence He says: *The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2]. Mark well the expression *upon them*, i.e., Israel. Note that with Paran, which is further removed from Sinai, He says *appeared*; of Seir, which is nearer, *He shone*; and of the revelation, of the full splendor of God on Sinai, which was the goal of the theophany (as is related): *The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai* [Exod. 24:16],<sup>127</sup> He says *came from Sinai*.

Similarly, the idea that the Light descended gradually from mountain to mountain is conveyed in Deborah's description of the grandeur of Israel at the revelation at Sinai, when she exclaimed: *O Lord, when You came forth from Seir, advanced from the country of Edom, . . .* [Judg. 5:4].<sup>128</sup> Basing themselves on this verse, our sages relate that God sent a messenger before the time of Moses to go to the Romans, and another to go to the Arabs with the purpose of presenting them with the Torah,<sup>129</sup> but each of them in turn spurned it. When Moses was sent to us we signified our acceptance in the words: *All that the Lord has spoken we will do and obey* [Exod. 24:7].<sup>130</sup> The aforementioned event happened before the giving of the Torah, consequently the verbs in it come in the past: *He came, He shone, He appeared*; they are not predictions of what will be.

You write in your letter that some people were duped by the apostate's argument that Muhammad is alluded to in the verse: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people,*

*like myself* [Deut. 18:15],<sup>131</sup> while others remained unconvinced because of the phrase *from among your own people*.<sup>132</sup> It is most astonishing that some folks should be duped by this, while others were almost persuaded, were it not for the phrase *from among your own people*. Under these circumstances it is incumbent upon you to concentrate and understand what I am about to say. Remember that it is not right to take a passage out of its context and argue from it. Before making any deduction, it is imperative to take into account the preceding and following contents in order to comprehend the meaning and fathom the writer's aim.<sup>133</sup> If it were permissible for anyone to draw proof from passages out of context, someone would have the right to say that God has forbidden us in the Torah to obey any prophet, and interdicted belief in miracles, for he could cite the passage: *Do not heed the words of that prophet* [Deut. 13:4].<sup>134</sup> He could also maintain that God commands us to worship idols, for He says: *There you will serve man-made gods* [Deut. 4:28].<sup>135</sup> Other illustrations could be multiplied *ad libitum*. But this is absolutely vicious. No text can possibly be cited as evidence before the aim of the author and its context are grasped.

In order to comprehend the verse under discussion unequivocally: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people like myself*, it is necessary to ascertain its context. In the beginning of the paragraph from which this verse is taken, He forbids us to engage in acts of augury, divination, astrology, witchcraft, spells, and the like. The gentiles believe that through these practices they can predict the future course of events and take the necessary precautions to forestall them. The interdiction of these occult proceedings is accompanied by the explication that the gentiles believe they can depend upon them to determine future happenings. But you may not follow this method in order to know what will happen. Nay, you will know it from a prophet that I will send among you, who will truthfully inform you of what is going to be and it will not fail. You will arrive at a foreknowledge of the future from him, without recourse to augury, divination, astrology, and the like. Matters will be facilitated for you by the fact that every prophet whom I will send to foretell what will happen will live in your midst. You will not be compelled to go in



search of him from country to country, nor to travel to distant parts. This is the sense of *in your midst*.

Moreover, He conveys another notion, namely, that in addition to being near you and living in your midst, he will also be one of you, an Israelite. The obvious deduction is that you shall be distinguished above all others by the sole possession of prophecy. The words *like myself* were specifically added to indicate that only the descendants of Jacob are meant. For the phrase *from among your own people* might have been misunderstood and taken to refer also to Esau and Ishmael, since we do find Israel addressing Esau as brother, in the verse: *Thus says your brother Israel* [Num. 20:14].<sup>136</sup> The words *like myself* cannot mean like me in rank and achievement, for He had indeed stated: *Never again did there arise in Israel a prophet like Moses* [Deut. 34:10].<sup>137</sup> The general drift of the chapter points to the correctness of our interpretation and will be confirmed by the succession of verses, to wit: *Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire* [Deut. 18:10]; *one who casts spells* [Deut. 18:11]; *you must be wholehearted* [Deut. 18:13]; *to you, however, the Lord your God has not assigned the like* [Deut. 18:14]; *a prophet from among your own people* [Deut. 18:15].<sup>138</sup> It is obvious that the prophet alluded to here will not be a person who will produce a new Law or found a new religion. He will merely enable us to dispense with diviners and astrologers, and will be available for consultation concerning anything that may befall us, just as the gentiles consult soothsayers and prognosticators. Thus we find Saul inquiring of Samuel regarding a loss that he sustained, as is stated: *For the prophet of today was formerly called a seer* [1 Sam. 9:9].<sup>139</sup>

Our disbelief in the prophecies of Omar and Zeid<sup>140</sup> is not due to the fact that they are non-Jews, as the unlettered folk imagine, and in consequence of it are compelled to establish their stand from the biblical phrase *from among your own people*. For Job, Zophar, Bildad, Eliphaz, and Elihu are all considered prophets by us although they are not Israelites.<sup>141</sup> On the other hand, although Hananiah the son of Azzur was a Jew, he was deemed an accursed and false prophet.<sup>142</sup> But we give credence to a prophet or we disbelieve him because of what he preaches, not because of his descent, as I shall explain. This



prophet Moses our Master, foremost among all the prophets, whose colloquy with God we heard, and in whom we reposed implicit faith when we said to him, *you go closer and hear* [Deut. 5:24],<sup>143</sup> assured us that no other Law remained in heaven that would be subsequently revealed, nor would there be another divine dispensation, as He says: *It is not in the heavens* [Deut. 30:12].<sup>144</sup> For this reason we have been forbidden to make any additions to the Law or to eliminate anything, for He said: *Neither add to it nor take away from it* [Deut. 13:1].<sup>145</sup> We pledged and obligated ourselves to God to abide by His Law, we, our children, and our children's children, until the end of time. This is the content of his statement: *Concealed acts concern the Lord our God; but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching* [Deut. 29:28]. Any prophet, therefore, no matter what his pedigree is, be he priest, Levite, or Amalekite, is perfidious even if he asserts that only one of the precepts of the Torah is void, for he denies our Master Moses who said: *for us and our children ever*. We would declare such a one a false prophet and would execute him if we had jurisdiction over him.<sup>146</sup> We would take no notice of the miracles that he might perform, just as we disregard the wonder-working of one who seeks to lure people to idolatry, as He says: *Even if the sign or portent that he named to you comes true, do not heed the words of that prophet* [Deut. 13:3-4].<sup>147</sup> Since Moses, of blessed memory, has prohibited idol worship for all time, we know that the miracles of a would-be seducer to idolatry are wrought by trickery and sorcery. Similarly, since Moses has taught us that the Law is eternal, we definitely stamp as a prevaricator anyone who argues that it was destined to be in force for a fixed period of time, because he contravenes Moses.<sup>148</sup> Consequently, we do not ask him for a sign and we pay no attention to supernatural performances, which impress us as such when he performs them. Inasmuch as we believe in Moses not because of his miracles, we are under no obligation to make comparisons between his miracles and those of others. Our everlastingly firm trust and steadfast faith in him is due to the fact that we as well as he heard the divine discourse at Sinai, as He states: *And they will trust you forever* [Exod. 19:9].

This event is analogous to the situation of two witnesses who observed a certain act simultaneously. Each of them saw what his fellow

saw, and each of them is sure of the truth of his fellow's statement as well as of his own, and does not require proof or demonstration, whereas other people, to whom they would report their testimony, would not be absolutely convinced without confirmation or certification to everybody's satisfaction. Similarly, we of the Jewish faith are convinced of the truth of the prophecy of Moses, not simply because of his wonders, but because we, like him, witnessed the theophany on Mount Sinai. He performed all of the miracles only as the occasion demanded, as is recorded in Scripture. We do not give credence to the tenets of a miracle worker in the same way we trust in the truth of Moses our Teacher, nor does any analogy exist between them. This distinction is a fundamental principle of our religion, but seems to have fallen into oblivion, and has been disregarded by many of our coreligionists.<sup>149</sup> It is because of this reality that Solomon addressed the gentile nations on behalf of Israel: *Why will you gaze at the Shulammite in the Mahanaim dance?* [Song of Songs 7:1]. The verse means to say: "If you can produce anything like the Revelation at Sinai, then we shall concede some misgivings concerning Moses."

Now, if a Jewish or gentile prophet urges and encourages people to follow the religion of Moses without adding thereto or diminishing therefrom, like Isaiah, Jeremiah, and the others, we demand a miracle from him.<sup>150</sup> If he performs it we recognize him and bestow upon him the honor due to a prophet, but if he fails to do so he is put to death.<sup>151</sup> We require only a miracle as his credentials, although it may be wrought by stratagem or magic, just as we accept the evidence of witnesses although there is a possibility of perjury. It is because we are divinely commanded through Moses to render judgment in a suit of law in accordance with the testimony of two witnesses whom we believe, the possibility of false swearing notwithstanding.<sup>152</sup> Similarly we are enjoined to act in accordance with the declaration of one who asserts that he is a prophet provided he can substantiate his claim by miracle or proof, although there is a possibility that he is an impostor. However, He has also controlled us by teaching that if the would-be prophet gives a sign or a portent that appears credible, but he teaches tenets that negate the doctrine of Moses, we must repudiate him. This theme was made abundantly clear in the Introduction to our extensive commentary on the Mishnah, where you will find some useful infor-

mation concerning principles that form the foundation of our religion and the pillars of our faith.<sup>153</sup>

It is incumbent upon you to know that the rule that nothing may be added to or diminished from the laws of Moses applies equally to the Oral Law, that is, to the traditional interpretation transmitted through the sages of blessed memory. Be cautious and on your guard lest any of the heretics, may they speedily perish, mingle among you, for they are worse than apostates.<sup>154</sup> For, although this country as you know is a place of scholars, students, and schools,<sup>155</sup> they indulge in bombastic talk, but we warn our people against their occasional errors, heresies, and mistakes.<sup>156</sup> As for you in this distant country, although you are scholars, learned in the Law, and pious, you are few in number, may God increase your numbers and hasten the day of gathering you with the entire religious community.<sup>157</sup> If any of the heretics mingles among you and undertakes to corrupt the people, he will undermine the faith of the young and they will not find a savior. Beware of them, and know that it is permitted to slay them in our opinion,<sup>158</sup> for they repudiate the statement in the prophecy of Moses who commanded us to act *in accordance with the instructions given you and the ruling handed down to you* [Deut. 17:11].<sup>159</sup> In wicked defiance they assert that they believe most firmly in the prophecy of Moses, as the Muslims and Christians claim to believe,<sup>160</sup> yet they destroy and nullify His law and kill the adherents thereof. Whoever joins them is just like his seducer. I deem it imperative to call your attention to these facts, and to raise the young generation on these tenets, because they are a pillar of our faith.

### III

You have adverted to the computations of the date of the redemption,<sup>161</sup> and Rabbi Saadiah's opinion on the subject.<sup>162</sup> First of all, it devolves upon you to know that no human being will ever be able to determine it precisely, as Daniel has intimated: *For these words are secret and sealed* [Dan. 12:9]. Indeed many hypotheses were advanced by scholars who fancied they had discovered the date. This was anticipated in his declaration: *Many will run to and fro, and opinions will be multiple* [Dan. 12:4], that is, there will be numerous views

concerning it. Furthermore, God has communicated through His prophets that many people will calculate the time of the advent of the Messiah, but they will be disappointed and fail.<sup>163</sup> He also cautioned us against giving way to doubt and distrust because of these miscalculations. The longer the delay the more fervently we hope, as He states: *For there is a prophecy for a set term, a truthful witness for a time, that will come. Even if it tarries, wait for it still; for it will surely come, without delay* [Hab. 2:3].

Remember that even the date of the termination of the Egyptian exile was not precisely known and gave rise to differences of opinion. Although God fixed its duration in Scripture, where He says: *And they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years* [Gen. 15:13],<sup>164</sup> some reckoned the period of four hundred years from the time of Jacob's arrival in Egypt, others dated it from the beginning of Israel's bondage, which happened seventy years later, and still others computed it from the time of the Covenant of the Pieces<sup>165</sup> when this matter was divinely predicted to Abraham. At the expiration of four hundred years after this event, and thirty years before the appearance of Moses,<sup>166</sup> a band of Israelites left Egypt because they believed that their exile had ended.<sup>167</sup> The Egyptians slew and destroyed them, and the subjugation of the Israelites who remained was consequently aggravated, as we learn from our sages, the teachers of our national traditions. David, in fact, alluded to the vanquished Israelites who miscalculated the date of the redemption in the verse: *The Ephraimite bowmen turned back in the day of battle* [Ps. 78:9].<sup>168</sup>

In truth, the period of four hundred years commenced with the birth of Isaac, the true seed of Abraham as God declared: *For it is through Isaac that offspring shall be continued for you* [Gen. 21:12].<sup>169</sup> This is the sense of the verse: *Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years* [Gen. 15:13].<sup>170</sup> The four hundred years mentioned in this forecast refer to the duration of the exile and not solely to the Egyptian bondage. This fact was misunderstood until the great prophet Moses came, when it was realized that the four hundred years dated back precisely to the birth of Isaac.<sup>171</sup> Now if such uncertainty prevailed in regard to the date of emancipation from the Egyptian bondage, the term of which was fixed, it is much more so with respect to

the date of the final redemption, the prolonged and protracted duration of which appalled and dismayed our inspired seers. One of them exclaimed in the form of a question: *Will You be angry with us forever, prolong Your wrath for all generations?* [Ps. 85:6].<sup>172</sup> Isaiah, too, alluded to the long, drawn-out exile when he said: *They shall be gathered in a dungeon as captives are gathered; and shall be locked up in a prison. But after many days they shall be remembered* [Isa. 24:22]. Inasmuch as Daniel has proclaimed the matter a deep secret, our sages have interdicted the calculation of the time of the future redemption, or the reckoning of the period of the advent of the Messiah, because the masses might be mystified and bewildered should the Messiah fail to appear as forecast. The rabbis invoked God to frustrate and destroy those who seek to determine precisely the advent of the messianic era, because they are a stumbling block to the people, and that is why they uttered the imprecation, "May the calculators of the final redemption come to grief."<sup>173</sup>

As for Rabbi Saadiah's calculations, there are extenuating circumstances for them though he knew they were disallowed.<sup>174</sup> For the Jews of his time were perplexed and misguided. The divine religion might have disappeared had he not encouraged the pusillanimous, and diffused, disseminated, and propagated by word of mouth and the pen a knowledge of its underlying principles. He believed, in all earnestness, that by means of the messianic calculations he would inspire the masses with hope to the Truth.<sup>175</sup> Verily all his deeds were for the sake of heaven.<sup>176</sup> Consequently, in view of the probity of his motives, which we have disclosed, one must not decry him for his messianic computations.<sup>177</sup>

I note that you are inclined to believe in astrology and the influence of the past and future conjunctions of the planets upon human affairs.<sup>178</sup> Dismiss such notions from your mind. Cleanse your mind of them as one cleanses dirty clothes. Accomplished gentile and certainly Jewish scholars refuse to believe in the truth of this science. Its postulates can be refuted by real proofs on rational grounds, but this is not the place to enter into a discussion of them.<sup>179</sup> Mark well, however, what Scripture has to say about the astrologers. At the time when Moses rose to leadership, the astrologers had unanimously predicted that our nation would never be freed from bondage, nor gain its independence.



But fortune smiled upon Israel, for the most exquisite of human beings<sup>180</sup> appeared and redeemed them at the very time that was supposedly most inauspicious for them. Furthermore, Egypt was smitten with the plagues at the very time for which the astrologers had foretold an epoch of wholesome climate, abundance, and prosperity for the inhabitants. To the failure of their vaticinations, Isaiah alludes when he says: *Where, indeed, are your sages? Let them tell you, let them discover what the Lord of Hosts has planned against Egypt* [Isa. 19:12].<sup>181</sup>

Similarly, the pundits, astrologers, and prognosticators were all of one mind that the administration of Nebuchadnezzar the wicked marked the beginning of an era of enduring prosperity. Forsooth, his dynasty was extinguished and destroyed, as was divinely forecast by Isaiah. He derided them for pretending to foreknowledge, and held up to scorn the state that fancied itself in possession of sapient folk versed in futurity. He says: *Let them stand up and help you now, the scanners of heaven, the star-gazers, who announce, month by month, whatever will come upon you* [Isa. 47:13].<sup>182</sup>

This is how matters stand regarding the era of the Messiah, may he speedily come. For while the gentiles believe that our nation will never constitute an independent state, nor will it ever rise above its present condition,<sup>183</sup> and all the astrologers, diviners, and augurs concur in this opinion, God will prove their views and beliefs false, and will order the advent of the Messiah. Isaiah makes reference to this event in the verse: *I who annul the omens of the diviners, and make fools of the augurs, who turn sages back and make nonsense of their knowledge; but confirm the word of My servant and fulfill the prediction of My messenger. It is I who say of Jerusalem, "It shall be inhabited," and of the towns of Judah, "They shall be rebuilt; and I will restore their ruined places"* [Isa. 44:25–26].<sup>184</sup> This is the correct view that every Israelite should hold, without paying any attention to the conjunctions of the stars, of greater and smaller magnitude.<sup>185</sup>

I have observed your statement that in your country science is little cultivated, and that learning does not flourish, and you attribute it to the influence of the conjunction in the earthly trigon.<sup>186</sup> Remember that this low state of learning and science is not peculiar to your country, but is widely prevalent in Israel today. Indeed a divine premonition of such a state of affairs through Isaiah says: *Truly, I shall*



*further baffle that people with bafflement upon bafflement; and the wisdom of its wise shall fail, and the prudence of its prudent shall vanish* [Isa. 29:14].<sup>187</sup>

This condition is not due to the earthly or fiery trigon, as is proved by the fact that Solomon, king of Israel, lived during the earthly trigon,<sup>188</sup> and yet Scripture testifies that *he was the wisest of all men* [1 Kings 5:11].<sup>189</sup> So did Abraham of blessed memory, who was designated the Pillar of the World,<sup>190</sup> discover the First Cause of the entire universe and demonstrate the central importance of the principle of the unity of God for all mankind.<sup>191</sup> He, Isaac, and Jacob, all three of them, carry the throne of the glory in their hearts; to make use of a rabbinical metaphor "the patriarchs are the chariot,"<sup>192</sup> which in turn was suggested by the verse *God rose up over him* [Gen. 35:13]. The meaning is that they have attained a true conception of the deity, yet the three patriarchs lived during the earthly trigon.

This matter will become clear if the following facts are borne in mind. There is first the smaller conjunction, that is, the meeting of Saturn with Jupiter, which occurs once in approximately twenty years. These conjunctions continue to take place twelve times within the same trigon, covering a period of two hundred and forty years. Then conjunctions take place in the second trigon; the change from one trigon to another is known as the medium conjunction. It is the conjunction of change, which occurs every two hundred and forty solar years. According to this calculation an interval of nine hundred and sixty years will elapse between the first and second meeting of two planets in the same point on the zodiac. This is termed the great conjunction, and occurs once in nine hundred and sixty years. This is the time that must elapse between the first and second meeting of Saturn and Jupiter in the same degree of Aries. If you calculate back, you will understand my statement above that Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, as well as David and Solomon, lived during the earthly trigon. My purpose in going into detail was to dispel any of your suspicions that the trigon exercises any influence upon human affairs.<sup>193</sup>

Furthermore you write that some people have figured out the forthcoming conjunction and have determined that all of the seven planets will meet in one of the constellations of the zodiac. This is an untrue forecast by the one who told you this.<sup>194</sup> There will simply not be a

seven-planet conjunction, either in the next meeting or in the following ones. Such an event will not happen even in ten thousand years, as is well known to those who are familiar with the astronomical law of equation. Verily, this is the calculation of an ignorant person, as is evinced by another remark of his, quoted by you, to the effect that there will be a deluge of air and dust.<sup>195</sup> It is essential for you to know that these and similar assertions are fabricated and mendacious. Do not consider a statement true only because you find it in a book, for the prevaricator is as little restrained with his pen as with his tongue.<sup>196</sup> The untutored and the uninstructed are convinced of the veracity of a statement by the mere fact that it is written; nevertheless, its accuracy must be demonstrated in another manner.

Remember that a blind person submits to an individual having power of sight for intelligent direction, knowing that he lacks the vision to guide himself safely; and an ailing person, unskilled in the art of medicine and uninformed as to matters detrimental or beneficial to his health, defers to a physician for guidance and obeys him implicitly. Just so, it is indispensable for the laity to yield unswervingly to the prophets, who were men of insight, and to limit themselves to what they teach them regarding the truth or error of any given matter. Next in importance are the sages who have studied the dogmas, doctrines, and views of our faith day and night, and have learned to distinguish between the genuine and the spurious.

After this exposition you may trust me that the statements you have previously quoted are inaccurate, and this applies equally to similar views that you heard expressed in conversation or have met in books. For the author of such sayings is either ignorant, a mountebank, or seeks to destroy the Law and demolish its bulwarks. Do you not realize the brazenness of these people who assert that there will be a deluge of air, and dust, and fire, in order to deceive and delude others to believe that the Deluge was merely due to a concentration of water,<sup>197</sup> and was not brought on by God to punish the immorality of the time, as is explicitly related in Scripture, which guides us against error and fallacy?<sup>198</sup> Similarly Sodom and the other cities were not destroyed because of their unbelief and the wickedness of their inhabitants, in direct contradiction to the Bible, which says: *I will go down to see whether they have acted altogether according to the outcry that has*

*come to Me; if not, I will take note* [Gen. 18:21].<sup>199</sup> So whatever happens in this world that has its source in God, they say it is the inescapable consequences of planetary conjunctions.

They have affirmed the truth of their propositions in order to undermine the principles of our religion, and to give free rein to their animal instincts and passions as do the beasts and the ostriches. We have been admonished by God against those views in Scripture to the following effect: "If you rebel against Me so that I bring disaster upon you as a punishment of your misdeeds, but you ascribe your reverses to chance rather than to your guilt, I shall increase your afflictions and make them more grievous."<sup>200</sup> This is the intent of His words in the Chapter of Admonitions: *If you remain be-keri toward Me, I too will remain be-keri to you* [Lev. 26:27–28]. Now *keri* signifies chance, hazard. It means to say: "If you regard My chastisement as a fortuitous event, I shall bring the most severe calamities upon you, *sevenfold for your sins*" [Lev. 26:21].<sup>201</sup> These foregoing remarks have made it abundantly clear that the advent of the Messiah is in no way subject to the influence of the stars.

Indeed one of our keen minds in the province of Andalusia calculated by means of astrology the date of the final redemption, and predicted the coming of the Messiah in a particular year.<sup>202</sup> Every one of our distinguished scholars made little of his declaration, discounted what he did, and censured him sharply for it. But grim fate dealt more sternly with him than we could have. For at the very time the Messiah was supposed to arrive, a rebel leader rose in the Maghreb who issued an order of conversion. As you are well aware, the event proved to be a great debacle for the partisans of this prognosticator. Indeed, the hardships experienced by our people in the Diaspora are responsible for these extravagances, for a drowning man catches at a straw.<sup>203</sup>

Now, my coreligionists, *you be strong and of good courage, all you who wait for the Lord* [Ps. 31:25]. Strengthen one another, affirm your faith in the Expected One, may he speedily appear in your midst. *Strengthen the hands that are slack, make firm the tottering knees* [Isa. 35:3]. Remember, God has informed us through Isaiah, the herald of the nation, that the prolongation of the adversities of exile will impel many of our people to believe that God has relinquished and abandoned us—far be it from Him—but He assured us that He would not

abandon and would not relinquish us for He declared: *Zion says, "The Lord has forsaken me, my Lord has forgotten me."* Can a woman forget her baby, or disown the child of her womb? Though she might forget, I never could forget you [Isa. 49:14–15]. God had already divulged this through the First Prophet, saying: *For the Lord your God is a compassionate God: He will not fail you nor will He let you perish* [Deut. 4:31], and also: *Then the Lord your God, will restore your fortunes and take you back in love* [Deut. 30:3].

It is, my coreligionists, one of the fundamental articles of the Jewish faith that most surely the future redeemer of Israel will spring only from the stock of Solomon son of David.<sup>204</sup> He will gather our nation, assemble our exile, redeem us from our degradation, propagate the true religion, and exterminate his opponents, as God promised us in the Torah: *What I see for them is not yet, what I behold will not be soon: a star rises from Jacob, a meteor comes forth from Israel; it smashes the brow of Moab, the foundation of all children of Seth. Edom becomes a possession* [Num. 24:17–18].<sup>205</sup> The hour of his arrival will be at a time of great catastrophe and dire misfortune for Israel, as was predicted in the verse: *And neither bond nor free is left* [Deut. 32:36].<sup>206</sup> Then God will bring him forth and he will fulfill the promises made in his behalf. A later prophet too was alluding to the messianic tribulations when he declared: *But who can endure the day of his coming?* [Mal. 3:2].<sup>207</sup> This is the proper belief that one must hold.

From the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah and from the statements of our sages it is clear that the advent of the Messiah will take place some time subsequent to the universal expansion of the Roman and Arab empires, which is an actuality today. This fact is true beyond question or doubt. Daniel is the last prophet to portray the kingdom of the Arabs, the rise of Muhammad, and then the arrival of the Messiah.<sup>208</sup> Similarly, Isaiah intimated that the coming of the Messiah will occur after the rise of the Madman, for he says: *Riders on asses, riders on camels, horsemen in pairs* [Isa. 21:7,9].<sup>209</sup> Now the rider on ass is the Messiah, as is evident from the verse, which describes him as *humble, riding on an ass* [Zech. 9:9].<sup>210</sup> He will follow the man riding a camel, that is the Arab kingdom.<sup>211</sup> The statement *horsemen in pairs* refers to the two empires Edom and Ishmael. A similar interpretation of Daniel's vision concerning the image and the beasts<sup>212</sup> is

correct beyond doubt. They are conclusions drawn from the plain meaning of the text.

The precise date of the messianic advent cannot be known. But I am in possession of an extraordinary tradition that I received from my father, who in turn received it from his father,<sup>213</sup> going back to our early ancestors who were exiled from Jerusalem, as the prophet testified: *and the exiles of Jerusalem that are in Spain* [Obad. 1:20].<sup>214</sup> The tradition is that a covert indication lies in the prediction of Balaam to the future restoration of prophecy in Israel. Incidentally,<sup>215</sup> it may be stated that there are other verses in the Torah that contain cryptic indications in addition to their simple meaning. For example, the word *rdu* in the remark of Jacob to his sons: *go down . . . there (rdu shamah)* [Gen. 42:2] has the numerical value of 210 and contains a hint as to the length of Israel's stay in Egypt.<sup>216</sup> Likewise, the statement of Moses our teacher: *Should you, when you have begotten children and children's children and are long established in the land . . .* [Deut. 4:25]<sup>217</sup> embodies a reference to the duration of Israel's stay in the land of Israel, from the time of their arrival to the exile in the time of Yehoiakin, that is, 840 years, corresponding to the numerical value of the word *vnoshantem*<sup>218</sup> (and are long established). We find many others like them.<sup>219</sup> By this method of cryptic allusion it was transmitted to me that Balaam's statement: *Jacob is told at once (ka'et), yea Israel, what God has planned* [Num. 23:23],<sup>220</sup> contains a veiled hint as to the date of the restoration of prophecy to Israel. The sentence means that after the lapse of an interval equal to the time that passed from the six days of creation to Balaam's day, seers will again tell Israel what God has planned. Now Balaam uttered his prediction in the thirty-eighth year after the Exodus, which corresponds to the year 2485 after the creation of the world, for the Exodus took place in the beginning of the year 2448.<sup>221</sup> It is doubtless true that the reappearance of prophecy in Israel is one of the signs betokening the approach of the messianic era, as is stated: *After that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy. . .* [Joel 3:1].<sup>222</sup> This is the most reliable tradition concerning the advent of the Messiah. I call it reliable, although I have admonished against it, and strictly prohibited blazoning it abroad, lest some people deem it unduly



postponed. I have already apprised you concerning it, but God best knows what is true.<sup>223</sup>

Your statement that the time of the advent of the Messiah is indicated by Jeremiah, who said: *It is a time of trouble for Jacob, but he shall be delivered from it* [Jer. 30:7],<sup>224</sup> is incorrect. For it must refer to the war of Gog and Magog, which will take place some time after the oncoming of the Messiah.<sup>225</sup> Some of the supposed signs, such as the Gate of Gerson and others, are very doubtful.<sup>226</sup> Some are wrongly ascribed to the sages, while others owe their origin to figures of speech and enigmatic sayings which should not be literally taken.

#### IV

You write that a certain man in one of the cities of Yemen pretends that he is the Messiah.<sup>227</sup> As I live, I am not surprised at him or at his followers, for I have no doubt that he is mad, and a sick person should not be rebuked or reproofed for an illness brought on by no fault of his own. Neither am I surprised at his votaries, because they were persuaded by him owing to their sorry plight, their ignorance of the importance and high rank of the Messiah, and their mistaken comparison of the Messiah with ibn Mahdi,<sup>228</sup> whose rise they are witnessing. But I am astonished that you, a scholar who has carefully studied the doctrine of the rabbis, are inclined to repose faith in him.<sup>229</sup> Do you not know, my brother, that the Messiah is a very eminent prophet, more illustrious than all the prophets after Moses? Do you not know that a false pretender to prophecy is to suffer capital punishment for having arrogated to himself unwarranted distinction, just as the person who prophesied in the name of the idols is put to death? For God says: *But any prophet who presumes to speak in My name an oracle which I did not command him to utter, or who speaks in the name of other gods—that prophet shall die* [Deut. 18:20].<sup>230</sup> What stronger evidence exists than his very pretensions to be the Messiah that he is a liar?

How odd is your remark about this man, that he is renowned for his meekness and a little wisdom. Do these characteristics make him a Messiah? You were beguiled by him because you have not considered



the preeminence of the Messiah, the manner and place of his appearance, and the marks by which he is to be identified. The Messiah indeed ranks above all prophets after Moses in eminence and distinction, and God has bestowed some gifts upon him that he did not bestow upon Moses, as may be gathered from the following verses: *He shall sense the truth by his reverence for the Lord* [Isa. 11:3]; *The spirit of the Lord shall alight upon him* [Isa. 11:2]; *Justice shall be the girdle of his loins* [Isa. 11:5].<sup>231</sup> God has conferred upon him six appellations in the verse: *For a child has been born to us, a son has been given us. And authority has settled on his shoulders. He has been named "the Mighty God is planning grace; the Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler" (Pele, Yoetz, El, Gibbor, Aviad, Sar-shalom)* [Isa. 9:5].<sup>232</sup> He continues to magnify him, and declares: *You are My son; I have fathered you this day* [Ps. 2:7].<sup>233</sup> All these statements demonstrate the superiority of the Messiah to all the descendants of Adam.

Transcendent wisdom is a *sine qua non* for inspiration. It is an article of our faith that the gift of prophecy is vouchsafed only to the wise, the strong, and the rich. Strong is defined as the ability to control one's passions.<sup>234</sup> Rich signifies wealthy in knowledge. Now if we dare not put trust in a man's pretensions to prophecy if he does not excel in wisdom, how much less must we take seriously the claims of an ignoramus that he is the Messiah. That the man in question is untutored is evident from the order he issued to the people to give away, as you state, all their possessions for eleemosynary purposes. They did right in disobeying him, and he was wrong inasmuch as he disregarded the Jewish law concerning almsgiving. Scripture says: *But of all that a man owns, be it man or beast or land of his holding, nothing that he has proscribed for the Lord may be sold or redeemed* [Lev. 27:28]. The rabbis explain, in their comment on this verse, "part of all that he owns, but not all that he has."<sup>235</sup> The sages accordingly set bounds to the bounty of the beneficent in an explicit ruling, which reads: "He who is inclined to be liberal with the poor, may not part with more than a fifth of his possessions."<sup>236</sup> There is no doubt that the reasoning that led him to claim that he is the Messiah induced him to issue a command to his fellowmen to give away their property and distribute it to the poor. But then the affluent would become destitute and vice

versa. According to his ordinance it would be necessary for the *nouveaux riches* to return their recently acquired property to the newly impoverished. Such a regulation, which would keep property moving in a circle, is the peak of folly.

As to the place where the Messiah will make his first appearance, He informs us that he will first present himself only in the land of Israel as is stated: *He will suddenly come to His temple* [Mal. 3:1].<sup>237</sup> As to the how of his advent, nothing at all will be known about it before it occurs. The Messiah is not a person concerning whom it may be predicted that he will be the son of so-and-so, or of the family of so-and-so. On the contrary, he will be unknown before his coming, but he will prove by means of miracles and wonders that he is the true Messiah. In allusion to his mysterious lineage, God says: *Behold a man whose name is the Shoot, and who shall shoot up* [Zech. 6:12].<sup>238</sup> Similarly Isaiah, referring to his arrival, implies that neither his father nor mother, nor his kith and kin will be known, for he will grow, by his favor, like a sapling, like a root out of arid ground [Isa. 53:2].<sup>239</sup> After his manifestation in Palestine, Israel will be gathered in Jerusalem and the other cities of Palestine. Then the tidings will spread to the East and to the West until it will reach Yemen and those beyond you in India, as we learn from Isaiah: *Go, swift messengers, to a nation far and remote, to a people thrust forth and away . . . which sends out envoys by sea, in papyrus vessels upon the water* [Isa. 18:2].<sup>240</sup> The redemption will not be reversed so that it will appear in distant lands first, and ultimately reach Palestine.<sup>241</sup>

What the great powers are that all the prophets from Moses to Malachi ascribe to the Messiah may be inferred from various statements in the twenty-four books of Scripture. The most significant of them is that the report of his advent will strike terror into the hearts of all the kings of the earth, and their kingdoms will fall; neither will they be able to war or revolt against him. They will neither defame nor calumniate him, for the miracles he will perform will frighten them into complete silence. Isaiah refers to the submission of the kings to him in the verse: *Kings shall be silenced because of him* [Isa. 52:15].<sup>242</sup> He will slay whom he will by the word of his mouth, none will escape or be saved, as is written: *He shall strike down a land with the rod of*

*his mouth* [Isa. 11:4].<sup>243</sup> Revolution and war in the entire world, from East to West, will not cease at the beginning of the messianic era, but only after the wars of Gog and Magog, as was indicated by Ezekiel.<sup>244</sup>

I do not believe that this man who has appeared among you possesses these powers. You know that the Christians falsely ascribe marvelous powers to Jesus the Nazarene, may his bones be ground to dust, such as the resurrection of the dead and other miracles. Even if we granted this for the sake of argument, we should not be convinced by their reasoning that Jesus is the Messiah. For we can bring a thousand proofs from Scripture that it is not so even from their point of view.<sup>245</sup> Indeed, will anyone arrogate this rank to himself unless he wishes to make himself a laughing stock?

In sum, had this man acted presumptuously or disdainfully, I would deem him worthy of death.<sup>246</sup> The truth seems to be that he became melancholy and lost his mind. In my opinion, it is most advisable, both for your good and for his, that you put him in iron chains for a while, until the gentiles learn that he is demented. After you have blazoned and bruited abroad the intelligence concerning this man among them, you may release him without endangering his safety. If the gentiles gain knowledge about him after he has been locked up by you, they will taunt him and pronounce him irrational, and you will remain unmolested by him. If you procrastinate until they learn of this affair of their own accord, you will most likely incur their wrath. Remember, my coreligionists, that on account of the vast number of our sins God has hurled us into the midst of this people, the Arabs, who have persecuted us severely, and passed baneful and discriminatory legislation against us, as God has forewarned us: *Our enemies themselves shall judge us* [Deut. 32:31].<sup>247</sup> Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase, and hate us as much as they.<sup>248</sup> Therefore, when David king of Israel of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, envisaged the future tribulations of Israel, he bewailed and lamented their lot only in the kingdom of Ishmael, and prayed on their behalf for their deliverance in the verse: *Woe is me, that I live with Meshekh, that I dwell among the clans of Kedar* [Ps. 120:5].<sup>249</sup> Note the distinction between Kedar and the children of Ishmael, for the Madman is of the lineage of the children of Kedar, as they readily admit.<sup>250</sup> Daniel also alludes to our humiliation and degradation *like the dust in*

*threshing* [2 Kings 13:7],<sup>251</sup> suffered only at the hands of the Arabs, may they be speedily vanquished, when he says: *And it made fall to the earth some of the host, yea of the stars, some of which it trampled* [Dan. 8:10].<sup>252</sup> Although we are dishonored by them beyond human endurance, and have to put up with their fabrications, we yet behave like him of whom the prophet said: *But I am like a deaf man, unhearing, like a dumb man who cannot speak up* [Ps. 38:14].<sup>253</sup> Similarly, our sages instructed us to bear the prevarications and lies of Ishmael in silence. They found it in a cryptic allusion to this attitude in the names of his sons, Mishma, Dumah, and Massa,<sup>254</sup> which have been interpreted to mean *listen*, *be silent*, and *endure*. We have acquiesced, both young and old, to inure ourselves to humiliation, as Isaiah instructed us: *I offered my back to the floggers, and my cheeks to those who tore out my hair* [Isa. 50:6].<sup>255</sup> All this notwithstanding, we do not escape this continued maltreatment and pressure, which well-nigh crush us. No matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David describes: *I am all peace; but when I speak, they are for war* [Ps. 120:7].<sup>256</sup> Most certainly therefore if we start trouble, and claim power from them absurdly and preposterously, we surely give ourselves up to destruction.

I shall now succinctly narrate several episodes to you, subsequent to the rise of the Arab kingdom, from which you will derive some benefit.<sup>257</sup> One of these is the exodus of a multitude of Jews, numbering hundreds of thousands from the East beyond Isfahan, led by an individual who pretended to be the Messiah.<sup>258</sup> They were accoutred with military equipment and drawn swords, and slew all those that encountered them. According to the information I received, they reached the vicinity of Baghdad. This happened in the beginning of the reign of the Omayyads.<sup>259</sup>

The king then said to all the Jews of his kingdom: "Let your scholars go out to meet this multitude and ascertain whether their pretensions are true, and he is unmistakably your expected one. If so, we shall conclude peace with you under any conditions you may prefer. But if it is dissimulation, I shall wage war against them." When the sages met these Jews, the latter declared: "We belong to the children of the district beyond the River."<sup>260</sup> Then they asked them: "Who instigated

you to make this uprising?" Thereupon they replied: "This man here, one of the descendants of David, whom we know to be pious and virtuous, this man whom we knew to be a leper at night, arose the following morning healthy and sound." They believed that leprosy was one of the characteristics of the Messiah, to which they found an allusion in the verse: *plagued, smitten and afflicted by God* [Isa. 53:4],<sup>261</sup> that is, by leprosy. The sages explained to them that this interpretation was incorrect, and that he lacked even one of the traits of the Messiah, let alone all of them. Furthermore, they advised them as follows: "O brethren, you are still near your native country and have the possibility of returning there. If you remain in this land you will not only perish, but also undermine the teachings of Moses, by misleading the people to believe that the Messiah has appeared, and has been vanquished, whereas you have neither a prophet in your midst, nor an omen betokening his oncoming." They were persuaded by these arguments. The sultan turned over to them so-and-so thousands of dinars by way of hospitality in order that they should leave his country. But after they returned home he had a change of heart with respect to the Jews, upon whom he imposed a fine for his expenditures. He ordered them to make a special mark on their garments,<sup>262</sup> the writing of the word *cursed*, and to attach one iron bar in the back and one in the front. Ever since then the communities of Khurasan and Isfahan have experienced the tribulations of the Diaspora. This episode we have learned from oral records.<sup>263</sup>

The following incident we have verified and know to be true, because it occurred in recent times.<sup>264</sup> About fifty years ago or less, a pious and virtuous man by the name of Moses al-Darri came from Darral<sup>265</sup> to the province of Andalusia to study under Rabbi Joseph ha-Levi ibn Migash,<sup>266</sup> of blessed memory, of whom you have very likely heard. Later he left for Fez, the center of the Maghreb. People flocked to him because of his piety, virtue, and learning. He informed them that the Messiah was about to come, as was divinely revealed to him in a dream. Yet he did not pretend on the basis of a divine communication, as did the former lunatic, that he was the Messiah. He merely affirmed that the Messiah would appear. Many people became his adherents and put their faith in him. My father and master, of blessed memory, endeavored to dissuade and discourage people



from following him. However, only a few were influenced by my father, while most, nay, nearly all clung to R. Moses. Finally he predicted events that would come true no matter what was going to occur. He would say: "I was informed yesterday that this and this would happen," and it did happen exactly as he predicted. Once he foretold a vehement rain for the coming Friday and that the falling drops would be blood. This was considered a sign of the approaching advent of the Messiah, of which the text says: "*I will set portents in the sky and on earth, blood and fire and pillars of smoke*" [Joel 3:3].<sup>267</sup> This episode took place in the month of Marḥeshvan.<sup>268</sup> A very heavy rain fell that Friday and the fluids that descended were red and viscous as if mixed with clay. This miracle convinced all the people that he was undoubtedly a prophet. In itself it is not inconsistent with the tenets of the Torah, for prophecy, as I have explained, will return to Israel before the messianic advent. When the majority of the people put their trust in him, he predicted that the Messiah would come that very year on Passover eve. He advised the people to sell their property and contract debts to the Muslims with the promise to pay back ten dinars for one, in order to observe the precepts of the Torah in connection with the Passover festival, for they would never see them again, and so they did. When Passover came and nothing transpired, the people were ruined, as most of them had disposed of their property for a trifling sum, and were overwhelmed with debt. When the gentiles in the vicinity and their serfs learned of this hoax they were minded to do away with him, were they to locate him. As this Muslim country no longer offered him protection, he left for Palestine where he died, may his memory be blessed. When he left he made predictions, as I was told by those who saw him, concerning events both great and small in the Maghreb, which were later fulfilled.<sup>269</sup>

My father of blessed memory told me that about fifteen or twenty years before that episode, some respectable people in Cordova, the center of Andalusia, among whom a number were given to the cult of astrology, were all of one mind that the Messiah would appear that year. They sought a revelation in a dream night after night,<sup>270</sup> and ascertained that the Messiah was a man of the city. They picked a pious and virtuous person by the name of ibn Arieḥ, who had been instructing the people. They wrought miracles and made predictions



just as al-Darri did, until they won over the hearts of all the people. When the influential and learned men of our community heard of this, they assembled in the synagogue, had ibn Arieah brought there, and had him flogged in public. Furthermore, they imposed a fine on him and put him under the ban, because by his silence he gave assent to the professions of his adherents, instead of restraining them and pointing out to them that they were contradicting our religion. They did the same thing to the persons who assembled about him. The Jews escaped the wrath of the gentiles only with the greatest difficulty.<sup>271</sup>

About forty years preceding the affair of ibn Arieah in Andalusia, a man of Linon,<sup>272</sup> a large center in the heart of France, which numbered ten thousand Jews, pretended that he was the Messiah. He was supposed to have performed the following miracle. On moonlit nights he would go out and climb to the top of high trees in the field and glide from tree to tree like a bird. He cited a verse from Daniel to prove that such a miracle was within the power of the Messiah: *And, behold, there came with the clouds of heaven one like . . . a man . . . and there was given him dominion, and glory, and a kingdom* [Dan. 7:13–14].<sup>273</sup> Many who witnessed the miracle became his votaries. The French discovered this, pillaged, and put many of his followers to death, together with the pretender. Some of them maintain however that he is still in hiding until this very day.<sup>274</sup>

The prophets have predicted and instructed us, as I have told you, that pretenders and simulators will appear in great numbers at the time when the advent of the true Messiah will draw nigh, but they will not be able to make good their claim. They will perish with many of their partisans. Solomon of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, foresaw that the prolonged duration of the exile would incite some of our people to seek to terminate it before the appointed time, and as a consequence they would perish or meet with disaster. Therefore he admonished them and adjured them in metaphorical language to desist, as we read: *I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field: do not wake or rouse love until it please* [Song of Songs 2:7].<sup>275</sup> Now, brethren and friends, abide by the oath, and stir not up love until it pleases.

May God, who created the world with the attribute of mercy,<sup>276</sup>

grant us to behold the ingathering of the exiles to the portion of His inheritance, to contemplate the graciousness of the Lord, and to visit early in His temple.<sup>277</sup> May He take us out from the Valley of the Shadow of Death wherein He put us. May He remove darkness from our eyes and gloom from our hearts. May He fulfill in our days as well as in yours the contents of the verse: *The people that walked in darkness have seen a brilliant light* [Isa. 9:1].<sup>278</sup> May He darken our opponents in His anger and wrath, may He illuminate our obscurity, as He promised us: *Behold! Darkness shall cover the earth, and thick clouds the peoples; but upon you the Lord will shine* [Isa. 60:2].<sup>279</sup>

Greetings unto you, my dear friend, master of the sciences, and paragon of learning, and unto our erudite colleagues, and unto all the rest of the people.<sup>280</sup> Peace, peace, as the light shines, and much peace until the moon be no more.<sup>281</sup> Amen.

I beg you to send a copy of this missive to every community in the cities and hamlets, in order to strengthen the people in their faith and put them on their feet. Read it at public gatherings and in private, and you will thus become a public benefactor. Take adequate precautions lest its contents be divulged by an evil person and mishap overtake us. (God spare us therefrom.)<sup>282</sup> When I began writing this letter I had some misgivings about it, but they were overruled by my conviction that the public welfare takes precedence over one's personal safety. Moreover, I am sending it to a personage such as you: *The counsel of the Lord is for those who fear Him* [Ps. 25:14].<sup>283</sup> Our sages, the successors of the prophets,<sup>284</sup> assured us that persons engaged in a religious mission will meet with no disaster.<sup>285</sup> What more important religious mission is there than this! Peace be unto all Israel. Amen.

## NOTES

1. Jacob, the head of the Jewish community in Yemen, is an unknown figure except for what Maimonides tells of him in this epistle. In this epistle, sent to Jacob, Maimonides praises him for scholarship and leadership. Jacob's father, Nathanel, leader of the community before him, wrote the *Garden of Intelligences*, a philosophic and theological tract. More on Nathanel can be found in J. Kafih, *Iggerot* (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1972), pp. 11–15.

2. This is one of the few instances where a long genealogy of the ancestry

of the celebrated Maimonides is found, and tradition maintains that it goes back to R. Judah ha-Nasi (second and third centuries C.E.), who compiled the Mishnah. Maimonides himself usually signed his own name and his father's name.

3. In this sentence, Maimonides succeeded in heaping praises on both father and son.

4. In rabbinic literature water is a metaphor for Torah, e.g., in BT Ta'anit 7a, and the implication is that Jewish learning is stored with Jacob and his father.

5. Based on Job 6:20, referring to the paucity of water, a problem faced by caravans.

6. R. Ashi (335–427/28 C.E.) is accepted as the compiler and editor of the Babylonian Talmud.

7. Traditional writers usually find support in the Bible for declarations they make from verses that are, in fact, out of context. Yemen, however, is in *the end of the earth*.

8. Maimonides may be referring to his brief stay in Palestine on his way to Egypt in 1165–66.

9. Nathanel, Jacob's father, whose death can be dated approximately to 1165.

10. One of the blessings on Israel when it is obedient to God.

11. Note Maimonides' humility, even if it is *pro forma*.

12. Maimonides expresses graphically how he wandered from his native Spain to Fez, to Palestine, and finally to Egypt. One wonders whether his allusion to Ps. 27:4 indicates that he entertained thoughts of settling in Palestine or only visiting it.

13. It is instructive to bear in mind that by the time he composed this epistle he had to his credit the masterly commentary to the Mishnah, which, as he informs us at the end of the work, he began at the age of twenty-three and completed when he was thirty (in 1168).

14. It is not possible to identify this friend and disciple. In his collected responsa the name "Shelomo" appears a few times.

15. The epistle thus far is phrased in florid Hebrew.

16. One may legitimately ask what the degree of literacy was in Yemen.

17. He is 'Abd al-Nabi' ibn Mahdi who c. 1170 conquered most of Yemen. He was defeated in a battle in 1173, and had to fortify himself in his castle in Zabid. During his years in power he was highly honored (one of the historians of Yemen reports that he was paid more honor than Muhammad). He tended toward extremism, which explains his decree against non-Muslims.

18. Maimonides refers to the religious persecution in Morocco initiated by the Berber Almohads, which was in force from the 1150s to 1180s. It was there that the *Epistle on Martyrdom* was composed. In the Hebrew and Arabic the Berbers are designated Canaanites.

19. The capture of Ai is described in this passage.

20. This is Amos's reaction to the second of the five visions of disaster he was shown.

21. It is too serious an event to be considered one of many.

22. The rise of the Messiah will be preceded by dreadful woes, called by this term in the BT Sanhedrin 97a–98b, where the reaction of a few rabbis to the miserable situation is: “May I not see them come.”

23. Part of the description of the overthrow of the Babylonians by the Medes.

24. One of the concluding verses in Balaam’s predictions of the future.

25. In the last admonition of the angel to Daniel.

26. In the account of the outrages by the wicked ruler.

27. Maimonides is about to present his view of the situation, ways to cope with it, and a sober understanding of what is wrong and what is right, what true and what false. This is the reason he urges them to read this epistle attentively and to convey its contents to their families.

28. Moses is the master of all the prophets, both those who preceded him, like Adam and Abraham, and those who followed him, down to Malachi. In the *Guide* 2:45 Maimonides, who classifies all the prophets into eleven groups, specifically excludes Moses from any group. Maimonides regarded Moses as qualitatively different because he was endowed with characteristics unique to him (also see *MT Hilkhot Yesodei ha-Torah* 7:6).

29. The Biblical text continues: *but it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath He made to your fathers . . .* [Deut. 7:8].

30. This is part of the introduction to the description of the theophany.

31. The rabbis related the name *Sinai* to the word *sin’ah*—hatred (BT Shabbat 89a–b). They date the hostility to the gentiles from the time of Revelation. Maimonides argues that the tension between Israel and the larger world became a factor from the time of the Revelation.

32. Amalek: Exod. 17:8–13; Sisera: Judg. 4–5; Sennacherib: 2 Kings 18:13–19:37; Nebuchadnezzar: 2 Kings chaps. 24–25; Titus: BT Gittin 56bf.; Hadrian: Genesis Rabbah 63:7.

33. Maimonides correctly differentiates between those who resorted to the sword, and those who employed other means. He refers to the anti-Jewish decrees of Antiochus IV. It is doubtful that he knew the anti-Jewish writings by Greek and Roman authors, such as Manetho or Cicero (cf. Stern, *Greek and Latin Authors on Jews and Judaism* I, 62ff. and 193ff.) But he was acquainted with Galen’s disparagement of Moses, as can be learned from his refutation of him in his monograph *Pirkei Moshe* (see Kafih 1.c., 152ff.).

34. The conclusion of one of the predictions of comfort by the prophet Isaiah.

35. Literally, the *Truth*. For its use in the Koran as an appellation of God see *Encyclopedia of Islam*<sup>2</sup>, III, s.v. “Hakk,” and *Lexicon of Islam*, s.v. “Hakk.”

36. David, the traditionally accepted author of Psalms, is not ordinarily called a prophet (in *Guide* 2:45, Maimonides does not classify him as a full-fledged prophet), but a saint.

37. The first verse is the call of the enemies, and God’s retort follows.

38. Of the first type of antagonists, all but the last two oppressed the Jews

in their homeland, while Titus and Hadrian were Roman emperors in whose days there were diasporas. There were also activities of literary anti-Semites.

39. Both Christians and Muslims, of whom we are about to read, engaged in polemics with the Jews and also in persecution and forced conversion.

40. This is an interesting psychological observation.

41. This word in Hebrew is the ordinary term for Christian. In this place, however, in view of Maimonides' reasoning, the rendering *Nazarene* is more appropriate. The following malediction is rabbinic, and can be used for any individual condemned by tradition.

42. BT Yevamot 45a and Kiddushin 68b.

43. I.e., it is a popular term, not a tradition. It appears in the medieval biography of Jesus as told by Jews. See S. Krauss, ed., *Das Leben Jesu nach jüdischen Quellen* (Berlin: S. Calvary, 1902), p. 39.

44. They condemned him to death. In BT Sanhedrin, in a passage censored by Christian officials, it is reported that he was hanged on the day before Passover. See Kafih 22, note 31. This is confirmed by John's Gospel, but the other gospels date it on the first day of Passover.

45. In *MT Hilkhhot Melakhim* 11:5 (originally censored), Maimonides likewise states that the verse refers to him. This was the consensus of rabbinic, and even of Karaite commentators to Daniel.

46. The assertion is explicit. Jesus was called the founder of a new religion some centuries after his death by "the descendants of Esau," i.e., the Romans, but he had nothing to do with it, and never considered it; and what he did was not a source of harm to Israel. This history of the rise of Christianity was current among Jewish writers in medieval times.

47. The fact seems to be that he was convicted by the Jewish court, but the Romans executed him by crucifixion.

48. It has been pointed out that in the Bible true prophets and others are sometimes called "mad" (see Hos. 9:7 and 2 Kings 9:11). But the nickname attached to Muhammad is either an expression of disparagement, or is based on the general view in ancient Arabia that a poet was a madman, and hence the prophet's nickname. In fact Muhammad challenges this epithet (cf. Koran, Surah 15:6, 44:13ff., 52:29ff., etc.). Jews probably seized on it for their own purposes. However, it may be that Maimonides did not use this term and it was introduced by a copyist who was accustomed to this appellation. The title of the sacred book of Islam, the Koran, was likewise perverted to *Kalon* ("disgrace").

49. Maimonides correctly links this ambition for power as a motive with his religious fervor, especially after his flight from Mecca to Medina in 622 with hundreds of his followers.

50. The most interesting explanation of the similarities between the fundamentals of the Jewish faith and those of its two daughters, which Maimonides is about to develop, was adumbrated by a Palestinian sage in the fourth century and expanded by an eleventh-century scholar, Judah ben Barzillai. He interprets Hos. 8:12: *The many teachings I wrote for him have been treated as something alien*, to mean that the Christians have taken the Torah and claim that it is their own, since they maintain they are the true Israel. And



God wonders: Shall I write down the hidden meanings (the Oral Law), which the Christians might get to know as well, and claim that they also are for them? Let these laws be treated as strange, so that they will not appropriate them. Cf. his commentary to *Sefer Yetzirah* 5-6.

51. This differentiation between the real and the artificial was also made by the poet and thinker Judah Halevi in *Kuzari* 3:9 and by Maimonides' son Abraham in his commentary to the Torah on Exodus 19:6.

52. Note should be taken of this distinction made by the Jewish Law.

53. The doctrines of the philosophers in the Middle Ages was that immortality was limited to the mind to the extent that it was actualized through the acquirement of intelligibles, i.e., knowledge of the theoretical and the practical.

54. It is important to remember that the derision and ridicule could be indulged in by Jews only privately, or they would suffer physical punishment. But the adherents of each of the other faiths takes its own very seriously and hurls attacks at the other and at Judaism.

55. In Dan. 2 and 7 the subject is the four kingdoms that will rise successively, followed by the triumph of the Law of God and of His people. Before the rise of Islam, the four kingdoms were identified as Babylonia, Persia, Macedonia (Greece), and Rome. Jews who lived in the Islamic domain counted it as the fourth kingdom, either by including it with Rome or by joining Greece and Rome as the third. It is not easy to determine from the passage cited and interpreted by Maimonides which of the two approaches he adopted, unless his comment that the state that the heavenly King will overthrow consists of Rome, Byzantium, and Persia suggests his understanding of the verse. It may be that he is guided by the existence of these empires in his time.

56. The story is narrated in Dan. 3 that an edict ordered the people to bow down to an idol at a given time, and the three Jews disobeyed. They were thrown into a red-hot furnace, but came out unscathed.

57. See *Bet ha-Midrash*, ed. A. Jellinek (Leipzig, 1853; reprint ed. Jerusalem: Wahrmann, 1947), 133, 137, 139, 143; Genesis Rabbah 2:5. The *Scroll of Antiochus* speaks only of the Sabbath, new moon, and circumcision.

58. The number fifty-two is a frequent approximation in the Bible (2 Kings 15:2,27; Ezra 2:29) and in postbiblical compilations. Actually, Greek control lasted fifty-seven years.

59. E.g., BT Berakhot 61b; BT Ketubbot 50b.

60. E.g., BT Berakhot 61b.

61. E.g., BT Ketubbot 3b.

62. In God's revelation to Jacob when Jacob dreamt he saw a ladder.

63. Genesis Rabbah 41:12 and 49:3.

64. Although the theme of the vision is the fall of Babylon to the Elamites and Medes, Maimonides unhesitatingly reads into it a forecast of the fate of enemies of the Jews at all times.

65. It is the second of the predictions that begins with *See, a time is coming*.

66. The consoling conclusion to the long list of maledictions in this chapter.



67. The same verse is used by Maimonides in *Guide* 1:34, for the few who are not theologically confused.

68. Literally, “heard the words from the Almighty.” According to tradition, the first two of the Ten Commandments were heard directly from God, and the others reached them through the mediation of Moses.

69. The rabbis were impressed by their haste in answering *we will do* before *we will obey* (lit. *listen*).

70. The context of the quoted verse is *but with overt acts, it is for us and our children ever to apply all the provisions of this Teaching*.

71. BT Nedarim 20a. This talmudic statement (also in JT Kiddushin chapter 4, Halakhah 1) is directed against those who know no shame. Since bashfulness is one of the characteristics of the Jew, Maimonides probably counts in this group people who entertain doubts regarding the religion that came to us through the mediation of Moses.

72. The Arabic reads *your word* (the same word is also in the preceding paragraph), but two medieval translations treated it as a mistake for the word that means *your community*, and this appears to be correct.

73. Particular attention should be paid to the fundamentals of Judaism that Maimonides spells out: the uniqueness of Moses and the eternal validity of the Torah. They are included in the thirteen articles of faith that Maimonides appended to his introduction to chapter 10 in the Mishnah Sanhedrin.

74. We speak of *one* book, when there are many, or of *one* as the first number. Neither is appropriate to God, who is One, incomparable, alone.

75. The Arabic term *kalim allah* is also the epithet of Moses in the Koran.

76. Maimonides marks the beginning and end by giving the first word of the Torah and the last three.

77. In his differentiation between the sources of other prophets and the position of Moses. Cf. *Guide* 2:35, 39.

78. The verse continues: *when the Lord said to Me: “Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children.”* In the tradition, Horeb is a synonym for Sinai.

79. Maimonides does not mean to suggest that the Revelation and the theophany were for the sole purpose of giving them the strength to remain steadfast, but that this was given them along with the faith to which they cling despite all adversity.

80. Jewish tradition ascribes Song of Songs, as well as Proverbs and Ecclesiastes, to King Solomon, who is named here as the father of the verse.

81. Maimonides offers the interpretation of verses in Song of Songs before he quotes them. Like the Midrash he uses as his source, he finds in them much more than the simple meaning.

82. The explanation comes from Song of Songs Rabbah 7:1. The application of the sentence is likewise there, and also the sense of the Mahanaim dance. Several implications of the word *Shulammit* are recorded there.

83. This is the verse he divides between the nations and her questioning reply.

84. The Hebrew word, a dual, means two camps.

85. In the verse after the account of the great vision and before the Ten Commandments were pronounced.

86. This is part of an enigmatic series of verses that may refer to the theophany at Sinai.

87. Regarding the four empires see note 55 above. The reference to them is found in Song of Songs Rabbah 7:1. The two empires in Maimonides' time were Christendom and Islam.

88. In its context the verse does not imply compulsion or even suasion, but that it will be a consequence of their exile and dispersion.

89. Maimonides knew firsthand that persecutions and forced conversions do not affect the entire Jewish population, but are limited to certain areas.

90. The complete verse reads: *And the many evils and troubles befall them—then this poem shall confront them as a witness, since it will never be lost from the mouth of their offspring. For I know what plans they are devising even now, before I bring them into the land that I promised on oath.*

91. After opening with a recitation of God's wonders to His people, which they heard from their parents, the chapter deals with the grave distress that afflicts the nation, emphasizes their steadfastness, and wonders why God allows them to be harassed.

92. Song of Songs Rabbah 2:7. It is called *Midrash Hazit*a because it opens with this word (Prov. 22:20). Maimonides' rabbinic source is also BT Gittin 57b.

93. This and the preceding sentence are directed at the contemporaries in Yemen who are victims of the forced conversion. The treatment of this sacrifice is said to be *an offering by fire of pleasing odor to the Lord* [Lev. 1:9].

94. In context the verse is Moses' call to the Levites to punish the worshippers of the golden calf.

95. The same behavior is urged by Maimonides on the victims of the Almohad persecution. See the *Epistle on Martyrdom*, p. 32.

96. Deut. 28:58 reads: *If you fail to observe faithfully all the terms of this Teaching that are written in this book, to reverence this honored and awesome Name, the Lord your God.*

97. He has in mind the practice of scholars in the Middle Ages who wandered from home to centers of study and discussion of Torah, and showed readiness to endure discomfort for this. It should be remembered that Christian and Muslim students also followed this practice.

98. This is a commonly held view, which is also mentioned in BT Gittin 52b, 53a. This was also the judgment of the man who aroused Maimonides' anger in the *Epistle on Martyrdom*.

99. The reasoning of this sort is summed up in the principle that "he suffers a severer penalty" [BT Gittin 53a], i.e., since he is punished for the grave sin of forsaking the Torah, it makes little difference that he disregards a single prescription.

100. He is the archsinner in Jewish tradition, cf. *Epistle on Martyrdom*, p. 28.

101. Maimonides may have selected this example because it is considered a "light act," i.e., not of major significance. See BT Avodah Zarah 3a.

102. His identity is not known. As an apostate to Islam he evidently undertook to spread the new faith among his former coreligionists.

103. The numerical value of the letters of these two words (Gen. 17:20) is ninety-two, and so is the value of the letters *MHMD*, Muhammad.

104. Deut. 33:2 reads: *He said: The Lord came from Sinai; He shone upon them from Seir; He appeared from Mount Paran, and approached from Ribboth-kodesh, lightning flashed at them from His right.* This is a brief summary of the theophany.

105. Deut. 18:15 reads: *The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people, like myself; him you shall heed.*

106. In response to Abraham's plea: *Oh that Ishmael may live by Your favor! God speaks: As for Ishmael, I have heeded you. I hereby bless him. I will make him fertile and exceedingly numerous. He shall be the father of twelve chieftains, and I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:18,20].

107. This accusation is found in the Koran (e.g., 2:73), and it was taken up and expanded later by Muslim critics of Jews and Judaism. Cf. article by Ignaz Goldziher (1850–1921), the outstanding student of Islam, in *Zeitschrift der morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 32 (1878): 341–67 and by Martin Schreiner (1863–1926), in *ibid.*, 42:591–675.

108. This word was coined to reflect the play on words Maimonides utilizes. The Arabic term for *apostle* is *rasul*; the Hebrew word is *pasul*, which sounds like it means unfit, disqualified.

109. Literally, “a tradition from everybody to everybody.” In the Islamic world a statement handed down in an unbroken chain from generation to generation by the whole community is unchallengeably true.

110. Modern examination of the Greek, Latin, and Syriac versions of the Bible have revealed a great many variations.

111. I.e., the phrase implies only numerical strength, with no suggestion of prophethood.

112. In this phrase also the root *rb* is used to denote a large population.

113. If the verb *I shall bless him* stood before the words *I will make him numerous*, it might be understood by people desperately looking for proof to refer to their prophet.

114. The two words *bm'd m'd* come right after the phrase *I shall make him numerous*, not after the earlier verb *I shall bless him*.

115. Maimonides stresses this point to exclude any other claimant, just as earlier Judah Halevi developed the idea in *Kuzari* 2:14.

116. The context of the verse is the incident of Sarah's demand that her husband cast out Ishmael and his mother. Since Abraham hesitated, God assures him of Isaac's privileged status.

117. The use of the particle *gam* (too) proves that Ishmael is an addition, a concession to Abraham's concern for this son (see Gen. 21:10–13).

118. Part of Jacob's blessing of his two grandchildren, the sons of Joseph.

119. At the point where the patriarch's name is changed from Abram to Abraham.

120. It follows the consolation to Abraham regarding Ishmael.

121. In Isaac's blessing to Jacob when the latter is about to leave for Haran.

122. The reference is to David, the traditional author of Psalms. He is not generally known by the epithet *prophet*. In the *Guide* 2:45 Maimonides categorizes him as a prophet of the second class (out of eleven). In Islam David is taken to be a prophet; see *EI*<sup>2</sup>, 2:182.

123. Koran 7:156.

124. Koran 61:6. Maimonides cites these two passages to substantiate his challenge. Muhammad asserts he is mentioned in the Torah, but elsewhere he declares his name is Ahmed.

125. The Koranic verse is "And when Jesus son of Mary said, O children of Israel, verily I am the apostle of God sent unto you, confirming the law which was delivered before me, and bringing good tidings of an apostle who shall come after me, and whose name shall be Ahmad."

126. The Hebrew words equal ninety-two and the name AHMD, fifty-three.

127. Exod. 24:16 reads: *The Presence of the Lord abode on Mount Sinai, and the cloud hid it for six days. On the seventh day He called to Moses from the midst of the cloud.*

128. Judg. 5:4 continues: *the earth trembled; the heavens dripped, yea, the clouds dripped water.* This is Deborah's ode in celebration of the victory over the Canaanites.

129. *Sifrei* (ed. Finkelstein), 396 (section 343); the story of the offer of Torah to the gentiles is linked to this verse.

130. The rabbis humorously criticize the Israelites for being in such haste to receive the Torah that they said they would *do* before they would *obey* (literally: "we will listen").

131. This verse is a stock argument among Muslim polemicists. The literal translation of the text in the Torah is: *from among you, from your brethren, like me.* See Samau'al al-Maghribi, *Silencing the Jews*, 45.

132. Samau'al argues that the words *Your brethren* may well apply to an Arab, supporting himself by the phrase: *Your brethren the children of Esau* (Deut. 2:4).

133. No one can doubt that this is a most reasonable requirement. Nor can Maimonides be challenged that he takes passages out of context. If it is for the purpose of edification, bolstering the faith, or any other purpose consonant with tradition, it is legitimate. But it cannot be done if it is misused to undermine the tradition.

134. The context of the verse is the attempt by a false prophet to seduce the people to worship idols.

135. Part of God's admonition not to be seduced to worship idols. Deut. 11:16 reads: *Take care not to be lured away to serve other gods and bow to them.*

136. Num. 20:14 continues: *You know all the hardships that have befallen us.* See note 132 above.

137. Maimonides consistently teaches that Moses was unique among the prophets; in fact, he should not be regarded as a prophet.

138. Deut. 18:9–16 reads: *When you enter the land that the Lord your*

*God is giving you, you shall not learn to imitate the abhorrent practices of those nations. Let no one be found among you who consigns his son or daughter to the fire, or who is an augur, a soothsayer, a diviner, a sorcerer, one who casts spells, or one who consults ghosts or familiar spirits, or one who inquires of the dead. For anyone who does such things is abhorrent to the Lord, and it is because of these abhorrent things that the Lord your God is dispossessing them before you. You must be wholehearted with the Lord your God. Those nations that you are about to dispossess do indeed resort to soothsayers and augurs; to you however, the Lord your God has not assigned the like.*

*The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet from among your own people, like myself; him you shall heed.*

139. The loss was the asses of his father, which led to his being anointed king over Israel.

140. Two random common names.

141. Of the characters of Job, save the last, it is generally assumed they were gentiles (BT Bava Batra 14b). Elihu ben Berakh'el ha-Buzi is said to have been Jewish. However, a number of sages hold Job also to have been Jewish. In fact, a summary seems to conclude that only some regard him a non-Jew. And in BT Avodah Zarah 3a only the first three friends are taken to be non-Jews.

142. He was challenged by the prophet Jeremiah, and was proved to have delivered a false prediction; see Jer. 28.

143. Deut. 5:24, the last sentence of the story of their fear to listen to God directly lest they die, reads: *You go closer and hear all that the Lord our God says, and then you tell us everything that the Lord our God tells you, and we willingly do it.*

144. Continuing the assertion that the fulfillment of the Torah is not much of a strain, Deut. 30:12 emphasizes: *It is not in the heavens, that you should say, "Who among us can go up to the heavens and get it for us and impart it to us, that we may observe it?"*

145. Deut. 13:1 reads in full: *Be careful to observe only that which I enjoin upon you: neither add to it nor take away from it.*

146. I.e., if we were an independent state, and not subject to other governments with their legal systems. It is to be noted how emphatic Maimonides is in his insistence that first and foremost is the content of the pretender's message rather than the skills he may display.

147. Deut. 13:4 reads: *Do not heed the words of that prophet or that dream-diviner. For the Lord your God is testing you. . . .*

148. Once again Maimonides states his basic thesis: nothing about the role of Moses, his person, or his miracles bears any resemblance to any other prophet.

149. Since his discourse is beyond criticism, we ask him to perform a miracle to verify that he is indeed a prophet.

150. The miracle is parallel to the testimony of two witnesses who may be sure of what they wish to testify and we accept their statements as valid without their feeling of certainty.

151. See note 146 above.



152. Deut. 17:6 rules: *A person shall be put to death only on the testimony of two or more witnesses; he must not be put to death on the testimony of a single witness.* This is the basis of the faith put in two witnesses.

153. A full exposition of the subject will be found in the Introduction (ed. Kafih), 4–11.

154. In this admonition Maimonides warns his readers against the wiles of anti-Talmudic Jewish groups, such as the Karaites or the Samaritans, who protest their absolute faith in the Torah, but do not accept the oral tradition.

155. In Maimonides' time Egypt was the home of many Karaites and Samaritans, and many were influential in their group or in government circles.

156. In one of his responsa (ed. Blau, no. 242/II, 434ff.), Maimonides refers several times to the pernicious influence of "the heretics," and the duty to contravene them.

157. This is the traditional wish for an early restoration of political independence and the ingathering of the exiles to their homeland, the land of Israel.

158. This is not a legal decision to be implemented, but a definition of the extent of their rejection.

159. Deut. 17:11 continues: *you must not deviate from the verdict that they announce to you either to the right or to the left.* The rabbis explain the last phrase to mean that even if in your judgment they were to call the right left and left right. See *Sifrei* 207 (section 154).

160. The Christians have almost always considered the Jewish Scriptures as part of their divine heritage. The Muslims have not incorporated the Bible into their sacred literature, but they admit its divine origin. Curiously, they, on the one hand, accuse the Jews of altering and of falsifying it, yet at the same time they seek to find in it proof of their claims.

161. In Daniel (7:24, 8:14, 25; 9:24–6; 12:7, 11, 12) numbers appear that tradition has recognized as mystifying calculations predicting the end of the travail and the beginning of the glorious era (in Hebrew: *ketz*). Many Jewish writers have attempted to figure out when the change will come.

162. Saadiah Gaon (882–942) devotes chapter 8 of his philosophic work, *The Book of Beliefs and Opinions*, to the establishment of the date. See Rosenblatt's translation (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1948), pp. 290–322 and especially 295–98.

163. In his work *A History of Messianic Speculations in Israel* (New York: Macmillan, 1927), A.H. Silver summarizes the conclusions of the various students who attempted to fix the date. See in particular chapter 1 on the eleventh and twelfth centuries (pp. 58–80).

164. The passage from which this verse comes is a declaration of God to Abraham: *Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.*

165. This is the name of the vision in Gen. 15:8–21, where the covenant was made in a ceremony involving passage between the pieces of the beasts that Abraham had cut.

166. Evidently Maimonides has Exod. 12:40–41 in mind. The first of the

two verses reads: *The time the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years*. It was then that Moses was sent by God to free the Israelites from bondage in Egypt.

167. This incident is an old tradition, cf. *Mekhilta* 13:17 (ed. Rabin, p. 76) and 15:14 (p. 147).

168. Cf. 1 Chron. 7:21.

169. Gen. 21:12 reads: *But God said to Abraham, "Do not be distressed over the boy or your slave; whatever Sarah tells you, do as she says, for it is through Isaac . . ."* This is the accepted calculation, since, as we read elsewhere, their actual bondage lasted 210 years.

170. The commentator Nahmanides (1194–1270) suggests that the correct order of the phrases is different, i.e., *your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs four hundred years and they shall be enslaved and oppressed*.

171. Maimonides makes this statement in view of the premature move of the tribe of Ephraim.

172. It is obvious that in its context this verse (and the next) deals with a much more immediate difficulty. But Maimonides does not hesitate to read another meaning into it since it does not violate the spirit of the religious outlook.

173. BT Sanhedrin 97b. Maimonides' reasoning has its origin in the Talmud, which continues with this explanation: for they (the calculators), when their prediction time arrives and the redemption is not in sight, conclude that it is not going to happen. No, you have to wait, as the prophet says: *Even if it tarries, wait for it still* [Hab. 2:3].

174. The excuse he offers for Saadiah's efforts to fix the date of the redemption can be offered for the other attempts to calculate it. The masses were probably at all times not firm believers in the ultimate change for the better, so anything more definite might bolster their faith.

175. See note 35 above.

176. This phrase is taken from Mishnah Avot 2:15, and offered as counsel to the members of the community.

177. Maimonides follows the commendable Jewish tradition of maintaining an attitude of respect and acceptance of the words and acts of the ancient sages.

178. Maimonides was one of the few in the Middle Ages, Jews or non-Jews, who rejected astrology, and he tried hard to disprove it.

179. In his three major Jewish compositions, the *Commentary to the Mishnah*, the *Code*, and the *Guide*, Maimonides gave voice to his strong repudiation of astrology. In his response to the sages of France, who wished to learn his opinion, he took the same stand, and even blamed the fall of Jerusalem to the Romans on the Jewish neglect of preparedness, owing to their reliance on astrology.

180. An epithet of Moses. Maimonides' appreciation of the uniqueness of Moses traditionally and philosophically very naturally led him to designate the prophet in these terms; Jewish tradition likewise regards him this way. It must also be remembered that when the other dominant faiths glorified their

founders and objects of worship (cf. Tor Andrae, *Die Person Mohammads*), Jews realized they had to emphasize the superiority of Moses.

181. In Isaiah's "lament" over the calamity that will overwhelm Egypt.

182. From Isaiah's satire on Babylonia.

183. Maimonides summarizes the doctrine that Judaism was replaced by Christianity and that no improvement would come in the fate of the Jews before they confessed the beliefs of the dominant faiths.

184. One of the numerous verses of consolation, which begin with Isaiah 40.

185. Although Maimonides rejects astrology, he demonstrates his knowledge of it by the certainty with which he makes his assertions.

186. The imaginary zodiac can be divided by two axes, one vertical, the other horizontal, into four quarters called trigons, and three of the twelve constellations are located in each. The earthly trigon (the others are the watery, airy, and fiery), according to the astrologers, is the period when culture is at an ebb.

187. Here is another argument against the inclination to believe in the effects of the heavenly bodies.

188. With the aid of astronomy it was possible to work out the relation between events and the movements of the stars and planets.

189. This chapter recites the impressiveness of Solomon and his accomplishments.

190. Exodus Rabbah 2:13. Maimonides calls Abraham by this title in *MT Hilkhoh Akum* 1:2 and in the *Guide* 3:29.

191. This is the honor of Abraham, that by his reasoning he arrived at the correct recognition of the God of the universe. It is the basis of the legend that he was thrown into the hot furnace by the idolatrous Babylonian king.

192. The statement (based on Gen. 35:13) is found in Genesis Rabbah 47 and 82. Note that by the insertion of the phrase *in their hearts* Maimonides converts the rabbinic explanation into a psychological experience. This rabbinic assertion was also explained theosophically. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, vol. 10, 505 (in the article "Kabbala").

193. Abraham bar Hiyya (twelfth century), who believed in astrology, also states in his *Megillat ha-Megalleh*, pp. 119-33, that the events enumerated here occurred during the earthly trigon. But he involves the course of the other planets and their locations within the zodiac, and does not call the earthly trigon unlucky. His figures are exact, unlike the round figures of Maimonides.

194. "Professional" astrologers in medieval times predicted that it would happen. See Boll, *Stern Glaube und Sterndeutung*, p. 111.

195. For the source of this belief see L. Ginzberg, "A deluge of fire and water" (in Hebrew), in *ha-Goren*, VIII. It is reported by Syrian and Arab historians that in 1095 the caliph Mustazhir in Baghdad was informed that the deluge in Noah's time was caused by a conjunction of the seven planets, and in this ruler's time six planets met and a heavy rain fell elsewhere.

196. Maimonides repeats this true adage in his letter to the French sages.

197. That is, a calamity in nature resulting from the unusual position of the planets.

198. Maimonides recalls what the Bible records of the sins of mankind and God's sending the deluge to *blot out from the earth the men whom I created—men together with beasts, creeping things, and birds of the sky; for I regret that I made them* [Gen. 6:7].

199. The destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, in punishment of *the outrage . . . that is so great, and their sin so grave* [Gen. 18:20], is related in the remainder of Gen. 18 and 19.

200. Whenever Maimonides challenges the belief in astrology as sinful, he utilizes the same verses from Lev. 26 as proof that *sin only* is the cause of calamity for Israel, as in *Hilkhot Ta'aniyyot* 1:3, the *Guide* 3:37, his letter to the French sages, and the *Essay on Resurrection*, pp. 230ff.

201. Maimonides paraphrases Lev. 26:21 and then he quotes from it. The context of the quoted phrase is: *I will go on smiting you sevenfold for your sins*.

202. Maimonides does not reveal the name of the individual who made the forecast. Since he finds that the Almohad persecution came when he predicted the appearance of the Messiah, it can be concluded that he expected him about 1150. Ibn Ezra, in his commentary on Dan. 11:30, counts several who made computations but were all disappointed, and calls their efforts “futile and pursuit of wind,” arguing that even Daniel himself did not know the date.

203. This is a psychological truth and shows understanding of the mood of the Yemenite leader, who was ready to believe anything in the hope that it would bring relief.

204. Maimonides' specification that the Messiah is to be a scion of David through Solomon made here, in his commentary to Mishnah Sanhedrin ch. 10, in *Sefer ha-Mitzvot*, negative commands 362, and in his *Epistle on Martyrdom* is meant to combat a tradition that traced the genealogy to Nathan son of David (cf. 2 Sam. 5:14), and confused him with the prophet Nathan. Cf. Rashi's comment to Zech. 12:12.

205. Part of Balaam's last predictions to the Moabite king Balak.

206. In the last song by Moses, a review of the history of God's relation with Israel, and a demonstration of the futility of idolatry.

207. Describing the imminence of the messenger.

208. Some commentators on the Book of Daniel in Muslim lands found reference to Muhammad in the second half of Dan. 11 and 12. Ibn Ezra is a notable exception. But in his interpretation of Nebuchadnezzar's dream in Dan. 2 he identifies the iron with the Muslims, unlike the usual trend of seeing Rome in the iron. He calls Byzantium Rome, yet it is Greece. He likewise finds the Muslims in Daniel's vision in 7.

209. Rashi and Radak correctly apply the vision to the Elamites and the Medes, who were about to overthrow Babylonia. But Maimonides, not bound by the context, sees in it a reference to the Messiah.

210. It is a traditional interpretation. Although Radak brings it in the name of some who differ whether it is the Davidic Messiah or the Ephraimite,

he himself is inclined to find in it a reference to Judah the Maccabee, and he further reports that Moses ben Gikatilla thought it spoke about Nehemiah.

211. This too is the traditional view. The traveler ibn Sapir in the nineteenth century wrote that in the city of Alexandria a statue of a camel and its rider was erected to serve as a seat of judgment.

212. Maimonides has Dan. 2 and 7 in mind. See note 208.

213. Maimonides brings in the authorities backing the tradition.

214. Basing themselves on this phrase, the Jews in Muslim Spain generally believed they were descended from the exiles of Jerusalem, and arrogated to themselves the distinction of being the most eloquent in Hebrew. See Moses ibn Ezra, *Book of Examination and Discussion* (ed. Halkin) pp. 54–55, and ibn Daud, *Sefer ha-Qabbalah* (ed. Cohen, Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1967), p. 97, line 94ff.

215. Maimonides digresses at this point to offer illustrations of how biblical allusions aided the rabbis. His purpose is to inspire more faith in the tradition of his family.

216. The implication is in Genesis Rabbah 91:2. The number 210 is the total years of bondage from the death of Joseph.

217. The remainder of Deut. 4:25 reads: . . . *act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness, causing the Lord your God displeasure and vexation.*

218. In the Hebrew word the two *vavs* are not included in the computation.

219. For example, in Hab. 3:2, the phrase *in Your anger remember to have mercy* has the Hebrew word *rahm*, which is said to hint at Abraham (both equal 248).

220. The argument is based on the word *ka'et*, “like the present time.”

221. For the year 2448 for the Exodus, see Rashi's computation in BT Sanhedrin 9a.

222. The remainder of this section of Joel 3 predicts great cosmic upheavals, wars, and refuge in Zion.

223. The report of this tradition raises several questions. What Maimonides calls “a family secret” is in fact a statement in JT Shabbat ch. 6, Hal. 9 (43a). Despite his awareness of acting contrary to his own admonitions and availing himself of the excuse that people were falling into despair, some scholars have suggested that this section is not part of the original epistle, but was interpolated by an outside hand. However, he does not actually predict the arrival of the Messiah, but only the renewal of prophecy. Above all, it is important that younger contemporaries or immediate successors of his speak of this family tradition, and the first translator into Hebrew corresponded with the Master. Further, it cannot be reasonably maintained that after 1216 (when prophecy did not return) someone would insert a forecast that it would return. Possibly Maimonides, who robbed his friend of the hope that the community was at the threshold of the final Redemption, felt that he had to provide him with some comfort.

224. Maimonides' explanation of the verse agrees with Rashi and Radak.

225. It is a bit surprising that Maimonides, who so readily takes verses out of context to confirm his arguments, challenges another person's action.



Possibly he felt that since JT Ta'anit 1:1 suggests the Messiah's age, the sense he finds in this text is more appropriate.

226. It is one of the gates of Damascus. In a pseudepigraph (Zerubabel), it is connected with the emergence of the Messiah.

227. Nothing is known of this pretender.

228. The wicked ruler who initiated the persecution.

229. For an earlier, similar reaction to R. Jacob's belief see p. 116.

230. Maimonides evidently classes the pretender as a false prophet with unfounded claims, and therefore subject to capital punishment.

231. The verses come from the chapter that has been taken to be a sketch of the Messiah.

232. The first six verses of Isa. 9 are explained by some as references to Hezekiah and the expected victory over Assyria. Maimonides' treatment of this text is in the tradition voiced in Deuteronomy Rabbah 1:20.

233. This verse has been viewed by many as a vindication of the Messiah, see BT Sukkah 52a.

234. This assertion is a restatement of BT Shabbat 82a at greater length. Maimonides develops this view in the *Guide* 2:32 and also in his other two major works, the *Mishneh Torah* and the commentary to the Mishnah.

235. The rabbis derive from this biblical verse the rule that a person must not spend on charitable needs more than a fifth of his possessions (BT Ketubbot 50a and Arakhin 28a).

236. In *MT Hilkhhot Arakhin* 8:1, Maimonides explains: "This giving more is not piety but silliness, since he will lose his money and will require help."

237. The emphasis on the land of Israel's being the Messiah's locale, also made in the *Epistle on Martyrdom*, is further proof that the pretender's claim is unfounded.

238. The Aramaic Targum of the Prophets (*Targum Jonathan*) says of this text: "This is the King Messiah, whose name is destined to be revealed." Bible commentators find a reference to Zerubabel in it.

239. This chapter, which is the essential one in linking Jesus to the Bible in the Christian view, has been regarded by many Jewish scholars as referring to the Messiah. Others find Israel depicted in it, and still others Jeremiah. See Neubauer, *The Fifty-Third Chapter of Isaiah* (Oxford: J. Parker, 1876-77), vol. 1 (texts), vol. 2 (translations).

240. See Rashi and Radak ad loc. who read of the Messianic age in this chapter, as Saadia Gaon did before them.

241. Like other arguments, this one also aims to undo hopes pinned on the pretender.

242. Notwithstanding the chapter division at the end of this verse, it and the preceding sentence belong with ch. 53, and are treated so by commentators.

243. From the messianic chapter; see note 231.

244. The grave threat and the divine role in the triumph of the Israelites over the combined hostile forces are graphically sketched by Ezekiel in chapters 38-39.

245. It is of interest that Maimonides chooses his proof against the

pretender from the story of Jesus, as he lived in the Muslim world all his life, and Muhammad also had a chain of miracles credited to him and a spiritualization of his person that continued to grow (cf. Tor Andrae, *Die Person Muhammads*, pp. 26–91 and 285–89). The wonders of Jesus are much more fundamental in Christian theology than the miracles of Muhammad in Islam.

246. As a deliberate impostor who arrogates to himself powers granted by God to the Messiah, he would be guilty of a grave sin. But this individual was not a presumptuous liar.

247. The verse begins: *For their rock is not like our Rock*. This quotation is part of Moses' farewell address to the people at the eastern bank of the Jordan.

248. This judgment indicates that Maimonides probably did not know enough of the difficult situation of the Jews in the Christian lands from the time of the Crusades (1096 and after), which was far more irksome and physically painful than under the Muslims.

249. Ibn Ezra and Radak cite the *History of ben Gorion* to the effect that Meshekh is Tuscany, an application of metonymy. But Radak prefers to translate the *meshekh* as *continuous*, and to explain that the cry is against Islam, "because the majority of the Jews live there."

250. Maimonides evidently equates *Kedar* with *Kuraish*, the tribe of Muhammad and the caliphs, as does Radak.

251. The verse describes the sad condition of the northern Israelites under Aramaic rule.

252. Dan. 8:10, with changes. See the comment of pseudo-Saadia.

253. In the Middle Ages the Jews under Christendom and Islam were forbidden to criticize those religions publicly.

254. Gen. 25:14. Three names from the list of the "children of Ishmael." The meanings he assigns to the names conform to the meanings of the roots on which the names are built.

255. This is one of the few instances where Isaiah speaks of himself in the first person.

256. Notwithstanding note 248 above, the depth of suffering experienced by Maimonides and his generation from the humiliation, degradation, and false charges heaped on them by the Muslims, particularly at the time of the Almohad persecution, is not to be minimized.

257. The examples of the four Messiahs are available in two versions. Although weighty reasons support the belief that the succinct account is the original in the epistle, the longer one is offered here in translation.

258. For some reason Maimonides does not mention his name. He seems to have been Abu 'Isa Obadiah al-Isfahani, active during the eighth or ninth century, and the spiritual father of the Isawiyya, a sect treated by Jewish, Karaite, and Islamic historians.

259. This dynasty ruled the Islamic empire from 661 to 750 and vastly expanded its extent.

260. This is the name in Arabic of the land beyond the Oxus river, the province of Khurasan.

261. In the description of the individual who suffered, yet was destined to be acknowledged as the sufferer for the many. One of the epithets can be translated *leprous*.

262. This is distinctly anachronistic. It was only some hundred years after his fall that a caliph of another family issued such an edict against the Jews.

263. It is surprising that Maimonides did not consult the available written sources.

264. The implication is clear: Maimonides is not at all certain of the story he related regarding the first pretender.

265. This man is not to be confused with Moses ben Abraham Dar'i, a twelfth-thirteenth-century Karaite poet, whose father moved from Dar'a to Alexandria. See *Encyclopedia Judaica*, 5:1302.

266. An important rabbinic scholar (1077–1141), with whom Maimon, Maimonides' father, studied Torah.

267. It is interesting that this prophecy speaks of the inspiration that will be bestowed on old and young, men and women.

268. Consistent with his views, Maimonides accepts without demur the prophetic endowment of this man.

269. The restraint and respect with which Maimonides relates this incident are impressive. He stresses his virtues, despite the illusions under which he labored. Maimonides cites him in one of his responsa in the matter of *tefillin*, cf. Blau's ed. no. 289.

270. The Hebrew phrase usually signifies the question regarding a dream asked of an interpreter. In our text it means finding something out by a dream.

271. Maimonides relates this story on the authority of his father, who lived in Cordova with his family before they set out on their wanderings. It is an incident for which he can vouch.

272. A likely misspelling of Lyon, an old city in France, but hardly containing the population of Jews mentioned here.

273. These verses do not suggest flying, only appearance in the clouds.

274. The loyalty of followers to a disappointing, disappointed redeemer, and the continued belief that he will come back and realize his predictions is common in the annals of the Shi'ite sects.

275. This is one of three times repeated in Song of Songs, and on that basis the rabbis stated that God adjured Israel in a threefold oath: that they not force the final redemption, not rebel against their rulers, and that the gentiles not oppress them too harshly (BT Ketubbot 111a). It is of interest that this talmudic statement serves as the main reason for many people's opposition to the Zionist movement and to the State of Israel.

276. This characterization of the manner of creation is found in rabbinic sources, cf. BT Hagigah 12a and Genesis Rabbah 12:15. Interestingly, Gen. 1, the story of creation, carries the name *Elohim*, which indicates divine justice. In Gen. 2 this name is used jointly with the tetragrammaton (the four-letter name), which stands for divine mercy, and therefore the tradition has included it in the story of creation.

277. Phrases from Ps. 27:4, which are very easily fashioned into a prayer for an early return to the land of Israel.

278. Isa. 9:1 continues: *On those who dwelt in a land of gloom, light has dawned.*

279. Isa. 60:2 continues: *And His Presence be seen over you.*

280. The customary conclusion of the letter, addressed to R. Jacob ben Nathanel Fayummi, begins at this point.

281. The phrase is from Ps. 72:7, which opens with: *That the righteous may flourish in his time.*

282. On the one hand Maimonides urges the recipient to circulate the epistle among the members of the community. At the same time he cautions him against letting it fall into the hands of a non-Jew. If there was contact between Jews and Muslims in Yemen, it is difficult to assume that it could be arranged both to have Jews read it and to avoid communication of it to non-Jews.

283. A phrase usually invoked when privacy or secrecy is recommended.

284. This is the traditional succession as traced in rabbinic sources. Maimonides mentions it because he wishes to endow their statement with authority.

285. BT Pesahim 8a. As he comments, the epistle certainly falls within the category of a religious mission.

## DISCUSSION OF

---

## THE EPISTLE TO YEMEN

I beg you to send a copy of this missive to every community in the cities and hamlets, in order to strengthen the people in their faith and put them on their feet. Read it at public gatherings and in private, and you will thus become a public benefactor. Take adequate precautions lest its contents be divulged by an evil person and mishap overtake us. (God spare us therefrom.) When I began writing this letter I had some misgivings about it, but they were overruled by my conviction that the public welfare takes precedence over one's personal safety. Moreover, I am sending it to a personage such as you: *The counsel of the Lord is for those who fear Him*. [Ps. 25:14]. Our sages, the successors of the prophets, assured us that persons engaged in a religious mission will meet with no disaster. What more important religious mission is there than this! Peace be unto all Israel. Amen. (p. 131)

These concluding words of the *Epistle to Yemen* speak volumes for Maimonides' heroic commitment to and concern for the community. The philosopher-halakhist may not remain silent while his community is in a state of confusion and desperation. He may not dissociate himself from a community that is being crushed by religious persecution and endangered by apostasy.

The *Epistle to Yemen* should be read as Maimonides' response to the tragic predicament of a community struggling to retain faith in the eternal covenant of the Torah despite the prevailing conditions of his-



tory. Because of the Jewish community's powerlessness and vulnerability relative to the growing strength of Islam, many Jews despaired of holding out against their religious adversaries who claimed that Islam was the authentic expression of biblical monotheism. How can a community maintain its self-image as God's covenant-elect when the events of history show no signs of divine love and concern? How can one believe in God's eternal promise to Israel when one's lived reality seems to support those who argue that God's covenant with Israel has been abrogated?

The plight of the Jewish community in Yemen revealed the problematic nature of *galut* (exile) in general. Judaism's credibility was strained by the discrepancy between biblical descriptions of history and the conditions that prevailed during the long dark years of exile. God's apparent silence stood in sharp contrast to the biblical account of God's intimate providential relationship with Israel and His overt involvement in its history (e.g., the liberation from Egypt). The gap between the community's lived and sacred histories was a disruptive feature of Jewish consciousness throughout history.<sup>1</sup>

Maimonides was fully aware of the desperate predicament of the community in Yemen and therefore felt compelled to write this epistle. Despite the danger in which he placed himself by writing it, he insisted that it be read publicly in every city and hamlet. The *Epistle to Yemen* is not a dispassionate philosophic treatise on history; it is a letter written with the express purpose of strengthening a community in its battle against hostile surrounding forces. The tone and substance of the epistle express the anger and bitterness of a leader who felt called upon to support a community that was disillusioned and shattered by the world in which it lived.

As a committed halakhist, Maimonides could not choose the path of the isolated philosopher who seeks personal perfection in a Plotinian type of leap of the alone to the Alone. The philosopher-halakhist is firmly implanted within the matrix of the community. He is barred from escaping into his self so long as his community is endangered. His personal security and quest for self-realization are of secondary importance when the people of Israel are suffering and endangered.

The singular individual who follows the lonely and tortuous path to love of God charted by Maimonides in his *Guide of the Perplexed* cannot remain satisfied with his quest for philosophical love of God if his community is in shock because of a loss of trust in the biblical promise. Like the philosopher of Plato's *Republic*, he must return to the cave. To use a midrashic metaphor, he must descend from the mountaintop as God told Moses to do when the people were engaged in worshiping the golden calf: "Go down. All the greatness that I have given you is

for the sake of Israel! And now that they have sinned, what need do I have of you?" (BT Berakhot 32a).

Maimonides could not turn his back on the community in moments of crisis because the community constituted an essential component of his self-consciousness. While scholars may debate whether commitment to the community is a necessary component of the Platonic or Aristotelian conceptions of human perfection, i.e., whether, according to these philosophers, the ultimate state of human realization includes morality and political responsibility, there is no doubt where Maimonides stood on this issue.<sup>2</sup> Maimonides exposed himself to great danger in order to aid the oppressed community in Yemen to regain a sense of purpose and direction. He returned to the darkened cave of history because, in addition to being a philosopher, he was a halakhic Jew. The language in which he spoke and thought, the language of *mitzvot* (commandments), is fundamentally a collective medium of discourse.<sup>3</sup> His consciousness was defined by his membership in the community.

Maimonides' life bears testimony to what he wrote in his *Mishneh Torah* concerning the individual's identification with the community.

One who separates himself from the community, even if he does not commit a transgression but only holds aloof from the congregation of Israel, does not fulfill religious precepts in common with his people, shows himself indifferent when they are in distress, does not observe their fast, but goes his own way, as if he were one of the gentiles and did not belong to the Jewish people—such a person has no portion in the world to come. [*MT Hilkhot Teshuvah* 3:20]

Maimonides' empathic identification with the community was expressed not only in the act of writing the epistle and in insisting that it be read in public, but also in the substance of the epistle itself. The nature of the arguments presented exemplify what may be called the "logic of the sufferer" as opposed to the "logic of action" found in his legal works. Whereas in his legal works, Maimonides sought to alter the community's understanding of religious life, in the *Epistle to Yemen* he sought to comfort and encourage the community to persevere. Maimonides' treatment of Christianity and Islam, his interpretation of Israel's suffering, his use of messianic categories to explain existing historical conditions, his description of the future Messiah, his mention of his family's tradition concerning the return of prophecy, and his frequent references to biblical sources that allegedly anticipated all the hardships that the community underwent—all these features are explicable in terms of Maimonides' overriding concern to communicate with a suffering community in the grip of despair and hopelessness.

The *Epistle to Yemen* ought not to be used to reconstruct Maimonides' overall theory of history and messianism or his general approach to Christianity and Islam. It treats such themes from a specific point of view, namely, through the eyes of the sufferer. It is no wonder, therefore, that Maimonides' treatment of these themes in his major legal works differs in important respects from his treatment here.

The following comments show the importance of considering the intended audiences of Maimonides' writings.<sup>4</sup> The logic that characterizes legal writings addressed to a community of action differs from the logic that characterizes a treatise addressed to a community of sufferers. In the former, Maimonides writes as a philosopher-educator; in the latter, as an empathetic leader of a broken community.

### THE AUDIENCE OF THE *EPISTLE TO YEMEN*

At the outset of the epistle, Maimonides mentions the religious doubt that was undermining the community's faith: "The hearts of some people have turned, uncertainty befalls them, and their beliefs are weakened. . . ." Because of its historical predicament, the community was beginning to question the validity of the binding covenant between God and Israel. This mood of uncertainty was reinforced by the apparent similarity between Judaism and Islam.

. . . a person ignorant of the secrets of the revealed books and the inner significance of our Law will be led to believe that our religion has something in common with the established confession if he makes a comparison between the two. For he will find that in the Torah there are prohibitions and commandments, and there are prohibitions and commandments in the others; the Torah contains positive and negative precepts, rewards, and punishments, and the others contain negative and positive commandments, rewards, and punishments. (p. 99)

The community was unsure of its ability to defend Judaism against the seductive arguments presented by other monotheistic faith communities. The conflict was not between Judaism and paganism, but between Judaism and another monotheistic faith. In addition, the great successes of such rival religions led some Jews to wonder whether it made sense to suffer for the sake of Judaism if the differences between the major monotheistic faiths were only superficial.

The polemical context in which the epistle was written is manifest in Maimonides' allusions to some of the standard arguments that were used against the Jewish community.

Put your trust in these true texts of Scripture, brethren, and be not dismayed by the succession of persecutions or the enemy's ascendancy over us, or the weakness of our people. (p. 102)

A great deal of polemical literature was based directly on scriptural arguments.

You mention that the apostate has misled people to believe that *bm'd m'd* is the Madman, or that in the same way *He appeared from Mount Paran* [Deut. 33:2] alludes to him, or, similarly, that *a prophet from among your own people* [Deut. 18:15] refers to him, or likewise his promise to Ishmael: *I will make of him a great nation* [Gen. 17:20]. These arguments have been rehearsed so often that they have become nauseating. (p. 107)

Jewish scripture was being used as a weapon against the integrity of traditional Judaism. Enthusiastic converts to Islam mouthing classical Islamic polemics tried to show that Islam is the genuine embodiment of the covenant with Abraham. Jews were accused of falsifying scripture by expunging all references to Muhammad from it. Such polemical arguments were difficult to ignore because they emerged from within the frameworks of monotheism and the biblical tradition.<sup>5</sup>

The audience of the *Epistle to Yemen* was in many respects similar to the audience of the *Epistle on Martyrdom*. The psychologically corrosive effects of compromise had undermined belief in the significance of partial fulfillment of the *mitzvot*. The sense of guilt that grips a person who knowingly compromises his principles under duress can lead to an all-or-nothing attitude to religious observance. Maimonides therefore felt compelled to reiterate arguments showing the validity of partial fulfillment of *mitzvot* in compromise situations.

Let no one conclude that he may freely disregard the less important ceremonies without liability to penalty because he has under duress committed some major sins. For Jeroboam son of Nebat, may his bones be ground to dust, was chastised not only for the sin of worshiping the calves and inciting the Israelites to do the same, but also for his failure to construct a booth on the Feast of Tabernacles. (p. 106)

The community was gripped by a paralyzing sense of guilt and doubt about its ability to withstand the seductive offers to abandon Judaism and join the ranks of the powerful majority. While recognizing the need to bolster the community's faith in its own tradition, Maimonides also had to confront the destructive "extravagances" to which this community had turned in its desperation.

. . . Indeed, the hardships experienced by our people in the Diaspora are responsible for these extravagances, for a drowning man catches at a straw. (p. 120)

The "extravagances" Maimonides had in mind were messianic movements and the popular belief in astrology. With respect to those who used astrology to calculate the coming of the Messiah, Maimonides argued that "the advent of the Messiah is in no way subject to the influence of the stars." Nevertheless, Maimonides could not ignore the community's deep need for external "proofs" of their imminent redemption. In reaction to the dire predictions of astrologers claiming that their fate was unalterable, many among the community turned to messianic prognosticators who presented evidence that the end of days (*ketz*) was fixed and rapidly approaching. The mood engendered by astrological speculation created an insatiable hunger for counterarguments that would show that the astrologers' interpretation of the blueprint of history was mistaken. The community required necessitarian beliefs that could counteract the necessitarian beliefs of the astrologers.

Maimonides mentions Saadiah's computations of the date of redemption. While acknowledging that all such computations are expressly prohibited by the rabbis, he refrained from criticizing Saadiah, who "believed in all earnestness that by means of the messianic calculations he would inspire the masses with hope in the Truth."

The community's preoccupation with messianism was not focused only upon arguments and calculations, but also upon charismatic personalities claiming to be the Messiah. Maimonides was well aware of this propensity and of its causes. When mentioning an incident concerning a messianic pretender, he writes,

Neither am I surprised at his votaries, because they were persuaded by him owing to their sorry plight, their ignorance of the importance and high rank of the Messiah, and their mistaken comparison of the Messiah with ibn Mahdi, whose rise they are witnessing. (p. 123)

Furthermore, the community Maimonides addressed was volatile and potentially impetuous. When people live in a prolonged state of persecution and deprivation, they become prone to take great risks in the belief that they have little to lose.

. . . Solomon of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, foresaw that the prolonged duration of the exile would incite some



of our people to seek to terminate it before the appointed time, and as a consequence they would perish or meet with disaster. (p. 130)

This then was the audience of the *Epistle to Yemen*. It was comprised of a people torn apart by contradictory claims. Astrologers claimed that their fate was sealed and nothing could effectively alter their miserable condition, while others, such as Saadiah, presented esoteric calculations predicting an imminent messianic upheaval in history. The community was continually bombarded by polemical attacks on the integrity of Judaism aimed at showing that the ascendancy of Islam proved that the Mosaic covenant had been abrogated and the Jewish version of Scripture was a forgery. While some were feeling grave doubts about God's providential involvement in Jewish history, others were swayed by charismatics claiming to be Messiahs.

### THE CONTENT OF THE EPISTLE

When reading the *Epistle to Yemen*, it is important to keep in mind its intended audience, just described. Both the style and the content of the work reveal Maimonides' concern to establish rapport with that audience and to help them make sense of their suffering. The following sections will indicate how the "logic of the sufferer" influenced both what Maimonides wrote in the epistle and how he expressed himself.

In order to communicate effectively with a suffering person, we must convince him that we understand his pain and agony. Words of consolation seem empty if they fail to convince the hearer that the speaker shares some of the bitterness and anguish that he experiences. Maimonides conveys this sense of identification with his audience's suffering in two ways. First, he cites numerous prophetic texts that ostensibly contain references to the community's situation and express the prophet's shock about such terrible suffering. Maimonides thus informs his audience that they are not alone; the great biblical prophets were aware of and disturbed by what this community would suffer at the hands of its Islamic rulers. By marshaling a wide array of sources from biblical literature, Maimonides made the plight of the community in Yemen into a focal point of all of Jewish history. His readers could feel that not only he but also many other great leaders in Jewish history understood their pain and anguish.

Second, by his harsh and abusive description of Islam and Christianity, Maimonides offers the sufferer an outlet for his anger toward his oppressor. In contrast to his usual controlled and unemotional style of writing, Maimonides inveighs against Christianity and Islam with

bitterness and derision. His unrestrained attacks on Jesus ("may his bones be ground to dust") and Muhammad ("the Madman") enable the sufferer to identify with the author. Before trying to inspire hope in his readers, he joins them in venting their deep feelings of anger and frustration.

Because of the specific audience-oriented nature of the *Epistle to Yemen*, one must be careful not to take Maimonides' remarks on Christianity and Islam out of context. They are not the pronouncements of a philosopher reflecting on the meaning of Jewish history as a neutral observer. His comments on the relationship between Judaism, Christianity, and Islam should not be read as Maimonides' definitive views on comparative religion. Likewise, his vehement description of the Islamic persecution ("Never did a nation molest, degrade, debase and hate us as much as they") is more an expression of anger than an objective judgment on history.

The author of the epistle is not writing as a dispassionate philosopher of history or of religion, but as a philosopher-halakhist who feels compelled to speak out in response to an immediate crisis situation.

#### THE UNIQUENESS OF THE TORAH

*See, I have imparted to you laws and rules, as the Lord my God has commanded me, for you to abide by in the land which you are about to invade and occupy. Observe them faithfully, for that will be proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people." For what great nation is there that has a god so close at hand as is the Lord our God whenever we call upon Him? Or what great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?*

*But take utmost care and watch yourselves scrupulously, so that you do not forget the things that you saw with your own eyes and so that they do not fade from your mind as long as you live. And make them known to your children and to your children's children: The day you stood before the Lord your God at Horeb, when the Lord said to me, "Gather the people to Me that I may let them hear My words, in order that they may learn to revere Me as long as they live on earth, and may so teach their children." [Deut. 4:5-10]*

While Maimonides often refers to this biblical text describing the election of Israel and the unique nature of its Torah, his use of it in the *Epistle to Yemen* differs markedly from that in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. In the latter it serves as a proof text for interpreting Jewish law in terms of universal criteria of intelligibility, whereas in the *Epis-*

*tle to Yemen* it is introduced to explain the animosity of the nations of the world toward Israel.

In the *Guide of the Perplexed* 3:31, Maimonides quotes the text in support of his attempt to offer reasons for all the commandments, including the statutes (*hukkim*). According to Maimonides, all the commandments are accessible to human reason. Unlike those who made blind obedience the supreme religious virtue and accordingly insisted on the nonrational nature of the commandments, Maimonides argues that only our ignorance of history prevents us from discovering reasons for all the commandments. The commandments do not constitute a private language intelligible only to the faithful, but rather they are intelligible to a universal audience. It is precisely because of this that the Torah characterizes the commandments as *proof of your wisdom and discernment to other peoples, who on hearing of all these laws will say, "Surely, that great nation is a wise and discerning people."*

Now if there is a thing for which no reason is known and that does not either procure something useful or ward off something harmful, why should one say of one who believes in it or practices it that he is "wise and discerning" and of great worth? And why should the religious communities think it a wonder? (Guide 3:31)

Because the text concerned places the commandments within a universal framework of rationality, it serves as a proof text against non-rationalistic interpretations of Judaism. The appreciative response of the nations of the world to the Torah inspires the Jewish philosopher to go beyond the conception of the *mitzvot* as a private language limited to a particular community and to explicate Jewish law in terms of universal canons of rationality.<sup>6</sup>

In the *Epistle to Yemen*, however, the text is given a strikingly different interpretation. The response of the nations of the world is not described as a positive and spontaneous expression of admiration that encourages the Jew to participate in a universal framework of rationality, but rather as a negative reaction of anger and animosity leading to Israel's tragic isolation.

Since God has singled us out by His laws and precepts, and our preeminence over the others was manifested in His rules and statutes, as Scripture says in narrating God's mercies to us: *What great nation has laws and rules as perfect as all this Teaching that I set before you this day?* [Deut. 4:8]; all the nations, instigated by envy and impiety, rose up against us in anger, and all the kings of the earth, motivated by injustice and enmity, applied

themselves to persecute us. They wanted to thwart God, but He will not be thwarted. (p. 97)

Israel's election as manifest in this, the most perfect of legal systems, unleashed diabolic forces seeking to undermine God's love for Israel and Israel's loyalty to the Torah. Israel's suffering in history is a direct result of the envy felt toward this people for its having been singled out by God. The real object of the nations' hatred is thus not Israel but rather God Himself.

This relentless battle against Israel cannot succeed, for it is a battle aimed at thwarting God's will. Israel's destiny among the nations is inseparably connected with God's plan in history. And, as Maimonides writes repeatedly, "Just as God cannot be destroyed, so Israel cannot be destroyed."

The struggle against God's will in history has assumed various forms. Amalek, Nebuchadnezzar, and Titus sought to destroy Israel and its Torah by brute force. The Syrians, Persians, and Greeks used arguments as means to undermine the Torah intellectually. The third form of the universal conspiracy against Torah was the establishment of monotheistic faiths to compete with Judaism. The devious strategy behind the latter scheme is that rival claims to divine revelation tend to cancel each other out, thereby neutralizing the claims of all revealed religions including Judaism.

. . . Thus doubts will be generated and confusion will be created, since one is opposed to the other and both supposedly emanated from one god, and it will lead to the destruction of both religions. This is a remarkable plan contrived by a person who is envious and malicious, who will strive to kill his enemy and remain alive, and if he cannot achieve this, he will devise a scheme whereby they both will be slain. (p. 98)

The hatred of God is so intense that the enemy will stop short of nothing to realize his diabolical plan, even should it entail his own destruction.

In response to the seemingly overwhelming forces aimed at Israel's destruction, Maimonides tells his readers to make the revelation at Sinai into a vivid and dramatic image that could capture the imagination of the entire community. The key to sustaining the community's loyalty and determination during dark periods of history is the internalization of the account of the Sinai revelation. The dramatic imagery of the theophany at Sinai must be inscribed on the heart of each and every member of the community.

It is imperative, my fellow Jews, that you make this great spectacle of the Revelation appeal to the imagination of your children. Proclaim at public gatherings its nobility and its momentousness. For it is the pivot of our religion and the proof that demonstrates its veracity. (p. 104)

Maimonides singles out the story of revelation as the central event around which Jewish consciousness must revolve. In order to withstand the onslaughts of history, the Sinai revelation must be transformed into a compelling image deeply engrained in the minds of all members of the community. By dramatically reliving this founding event of Jewish history, the community will recover the unassailable certainty felt by those who personally witnessed the unique moment of revelation.

In the *Epistle to Yemen*, Maimonides focuses on the collective nature of the Sinai revelation.<sup>7</sup> The fact that the entire community participated in the theophany at Sinai becomes a source of strength enabling the community to defy the spurious claims of rival monotheistic religions regardless of their historical triumphs and successes.

Remember, brethren, that this great, incomparable, and unique covenant and faith is attested by the best of evidence. For never before or since has a whole nation heard the speech of God or beheld His splendor. This was done only to confirm us in the faith, so that nothing can change it, and to reach a degree of certainty that will sustain us in these trying times of fierce persecution and absolute tyranny. (p. 104)

What is more, lack of belief in the veracity of the Sinai revelation is treated as a sign of not being a genuine descendant of those who participated in that event.

God has given assurance—He is an adequate guarantor—and informed them that not only did all the persons who were present at the Sinaitic revelation believe in the prophecy of Moses and in his Law, but that their descendants would likewise do so until the end of time. . . . Consequently, let everyone know who spurns the religion that was revealed at that theophany that he is not an offspring of the folk that witnessed it. (p. 103)

The certainty felt by the generation of Sinai is a permanent inheritance for their children. Jewish history is thus interpreted in terms of "the survival of the spiritually fittest"—the fittest being those who continue to believe in Mosaic prophecy. History purifies the community of foreign elements by exposing their lack of belief in the per-



manence of the Torah. Those who abandon the community in moments of crisis should not be considered as losses to the community, since their very decision to forsake Judaism shows them not to have been genuine members of the historical people of Israel. In taking this view, Maimonides was undoubtedly aware of talmudic precedents that ascribed character traits to those descended from the Sinai generation.

No man who experiences shame (i.e., who is not callous and impudent in wrongdoing) will easily sin: and he who is not shame-faced—it is certain that his ancestors were not present at Mount Sinai.<sup>8</sup>

The sense of certainty inspired by the Sinai revelation, moreover, is justified by the unique way Mosaic prophecy was validated. Unlike other prophets and the founders of other religions, Moses did not rely on miracles to prove the genuineness of his prophecy.

We do not give credence to the tenets of a miracle worker in the same way we trust in the truth of Moses our Teacher, nor does any analogy exist between them. (p. 113)

Indeed, Maimonides argues, the legitimacy of using miracles to authenticate prophetic claims logically presupposes the acceptance of Mosaic prophecy. Miracles can never serve as incontrovertible signs of an authentic prophet, since there are no reliable independent criteria for distinguishing between a genuine miracle and trickery. If miracles are nonetheless used to authenticate claims to prophecy, it is only because this procedure is legitimized in the Torah revealed at Sinai. We accept miracles in such cases for the same type of reasons (i.e., legal reasons) that we accept the testimony of witnesses in a court of law despite the possibility of lying.<sup>9</sup>

Unlike ordinary prophecy, Mosaic prophecy is corroborated by the participation of the entire community in the revelation at Sinai.<sup>10</sup>

Inasmuch as we believe in Moses not because of his miracles, we are under no obligation to make comparisons between his miracles and those of others. Our everlastingly firm trust and steadfast faith in him is due to the fact that we as well as he heard the divine discourse at Sinai, as He states: *And they will trust you forever* [Exod. 19:9].

This event is analogous to the situation of two witnesses who observed a certain act simultaneously. Each of them saw what his fellow saw, and each of them is sure of the truth of his fellow's statement as well as of his own, and does not require proof or

demonstration, whereas other people, to whom they would report their testimony, would not be absolutely convinced without confirmation or certification to everybody's satisfaction. Similarly, we of the Jewish faith are convinced of the truth of the prophecy of Moses, not simply because of his wonders, but because we, like him, witnessed the theophany on Mount Sinai. (pp. 112–113)

Apart from answering challenges to the genuineness of Mosaic prophecy, Maimonides had to counter the claim of rival monotheistic faiths that the covenant with Israel, though binding during an earlier period of history, had been abrogated in favor of a new covenant. Consequently, Maimonides adds the notion of unconditionality to his characterization of the Sinai covenant.

Similarly, He has avowed and assured us that it is unimaginable that He will reject us entirely even if we disobey Him and disregard His behests, as He avers: *If the heavens above could be measured, and the foundations of the earth below could be fathomed, only then would I reject all the offspring of Israel for all that they have done—declares the Lord* [Jer. 31:37]. In fact, this very promise was previously given through Moses our Teacher in the Torah. It reads: *Yet, even then, when they are in the land of their enemies, I will not reject or spurn them so as to destroy them, annulling My covenant with them: for I the Lord am their God* [Lev. 26:44]. (p. 102)

The covenant between God and Israel is not conditional on Israel's merit. Failure to fulfill the commandments does not nullify God's eternal promise to His people. The community is thus fortified in the knowledge that the fundamental framework of its relationship with God is permanent and unchanging. Nothing short of another Sinai theophany could challenge Moses' authority as a prophet.

The source of hope in the *Epistle to Yemen* is the belief in the eternal normative force of the Torah rather than the memory of the miraculous liberation from Egypt.<sup>11</sup> Maimonides believed that in order to survive the cruel vicissitudes of history, Jews must perennially reenact the dramatic story of Sinai so as to sustain their vital belief in the validity of Mosaic prophecy and in the eternity of God's covenant with Israel.

#### SUFFERING IN A MEANINGFUL CONTEXT

One of the dimensions of suffering that often makes it unbearable is its arbitrariness. Suffering may involve not only physical pain, but also the disorienting terror resulting from the sufferer's belief that he is the

victim of blind and irrational forces. A person can withstand this terrifying aspect of suffering if he is convinced of some underlying purpose that gives meaning and order to his world.

One way of achieving this is to locate a person's immediate experience within a broader framework, such as a grand plan or dramatic story spanning all of history. Maimonides does precisely this in the *Epistle to Yemen* by linking Israel's suffering to its being God's elect. The community's suffering is not the result of arbitrary factors, but rather is implicit in its very identity and faithfulness to the Sinai covenant. Maimonides redeems the community's suffering from its seeming arbitrariness and contingency by showing its relationship to the choice to remain committed to the Torah.

In this epistle, Maimonides concentrates on providing explanations of suffering that would support the community's strength to preserve. He does not mention *teshuvah* (repentance) or the relationship between suffering and repentance as he often does in his legal writings, because now his primary concern is to fortify the community against despair and disillusionment. Israel's suffering is interpreted as a heroic sacrifice in behalf of God. Like the *olah* sacrifice that is completely consumed by fire, Israel is wholly consumed because of its love for God and faithfulness to His covenant. It is in this context that Maimonides invokes the Song of Songs. Although elsewhere he makes this great love poem into an allegory of the philosophic love of God that is the highest goal of Judaism, here he interprets it as an allegory of Israel's unyielding commitment to God and Torah despite relentless persecution and suffering.<sup>12</sup>

Maimonides also strengthens the community's resolve to persevere by introducing the theme of God's explicit assurance that Israel will remain steadfast in its loyalty to the Torah throughout history. The phrase *trust you* [Moses] *ever after* (Exod. 19:9) is interpreted as an assurance of Israel's undying loyalty to the Torah of Moses throughout history. Whereas in his *Mishneh Torah* Maimonides had made the Sinai revelation a founding principle and a basis for legislative authority, in the *Epistle to Yemen* it becomes also a source of belief in Israel's ability to withstand its numerous enemies throughout history.<sup>13</sup>

Sinai creates a nation with a particular character. Apart from its doctrinal significance, this revelation inspires a people to uphold the Torah with courage and tenacity under all circumstances. Mosaic prophecy is thus confirmed by Israel's unwavering loyalty to the Torah in spite of the emergence of Islam and Christianity and in spite of the brutality of its enemies. Maimonides recalls in this context the biblical affirmation that the covenant concluded between God and Israel includes not only those who were actually present at the foot of the

mountain of Sinai, but also those who were not present (i.e., later generations). Instead of treating this affirmation as merely a legal notion extending the authority of Torah to later generations, Maimonides transforms it into a divine promise that later generations will feel the same certainty and conviction as the generation that witnessed the public theophany at Sinai.<sup>14</sup>

In addressing the sufferer, one must be sensitive to the specific needs of the person in question. Because Maimonides is trying to comfort and encourage a suffering community, he uses multiple models and suggestions directed at the different types of people comprising his audience. Consequently, the epistle shifts from calls for heroic defiance to comforting words of encouragement and advice. As in the *Epistle on Martyrdom*, Maimonides encourages people to abandon their homes and possessions and flee to foreign lands in order to escape religious persecution. In the same breath, however, he comforts those who, for whatever reason, refuse to leave their homes by telling them that each and every halakhic act they perform is significant in the eyes of God. Even if forced to compromise and acquiesce in ignoble demands such as public apostasy, a Jew should continue to perform as many *mitzvot* as he can. Compromise does not vitiate the validity and value of however few *mitzvot* he feels capable of fulfilling.

In addition, Maimonides seeks to comfort the less heroic members of the community by assuring them that the end of their suffering is not far off. At the very outset of the epistle, he characterizes their present suffering as *hevlei mashiah*, the birth pangs of the Messiah, implying that it is a sign of the approach of redemption.

Indeed, our hearts are weakened, our minds are confused, and our strength wanes because of the dire misfortunes that have come upon us in the form of the religious persecution in the two ends of the world, the East and the West, *so they were in the midst of Israel, some on this side and some on the other side* [Josh. 8:22]. It is of the like of this dreadful occasion the prophet prayed and interceded in our behalf: *I said, "Oh, Lord God, refrain! How will Jacob survive? He is so small"* [Amos 7:5]. Indeed, this is a subject that no religious person dare take lightly, nor anyone put aside who believes faithfully in Moses. There is no doubt that these are the messianic travails concerning which the sages invoked God that they be spared seeing and experiencing them. The prophets trembled when they envisioned them, as Isaiah reacted: *My heart pants, fearfulness affrights me; the twilight I have longed for has been turned into trembling* [Isa 21:4]. And the divine exclamation in the Torah expresses sympathy with

those who will experience them, by saying: *Alas, who shall live when God does this!* [Num 24:23]. (pp. 95–96)

Maimonides repeatedly adduces evidence from Scripture to support the claim that what the community was undergoing was not a unique and unanticipated historical aberration, but rather was a part of a grand scheme of history known to the ancient prophets. Because Israel's suffering was a direct consequence of its election, the prophets predicted that future generations would suffer terrible persecutions. The *Epistle to Yemen* is filled with references to prophetic premonitions of the community's present circumstances. Maimonides thereby tries to make his readers aware of the prophets' empathic involvement with their suffering. Through listening to the prophetic anguish, the painful isolation and loneliness of the Jews of Yemen is in some way alleviated.

In addition, he cites numerous precedents from Jewish history of communities that underwent and survived similar persecutions. He refers, for example, to the period during the Second Commonwealth when Jews were compelled to profane the Sabbath, abstain from practicing circumcision, and write upon their garments: "I do not have a portion in the Lord God of Israel." Many scholars have questioned the source of Maimonides' claim that this persecution lasted fifty-two years.<sup>15</sup> From the context, however, it seems clear that Maimonides mentioned a definite length of time in order to reinforce the rabbinic observation that "persecutions are of short duration." Such observations could have an important impact on the minds of his readers by encouraging them to persevere just a short while longer.

As if to counteract the sufferer's feeling that his condition is permanent and hopeless, Maimonides refers to the changing fortunes of Jewish history. Periods of darkness were succeeded by periods of prosperity and cultural flourishing. At the same time, however, he tempers his message of hope with caution. While belief in the possibility of change would clearly have a salutary effect on the community's attitude toward its condition, the belief that its suffering heralded the coming of the Messiah could have dangerous consequences. Maimonides realized that by introducing the concept of *hevlei mashiah* he risked opening up a Pandora's box of historical fantasies and reckless behavior.

Maimonides mentions the community's interest in Saadiah's computations and the excitement surrounding other predictions concerning the *ketz*, the commencement of the end of days. While he understands the reasons behind the interest in messianic speculations, his attitude on this issue is ambivalent and cautionary. On the one hand he states



that "no human being will ever be able to determine it [the date of redemption] precisely, as Daniel has intimated: *For the words are secret and sealed.*" On the other hand, however, he intimates—by this and other statements from Daniel—that the date of redemption is fixed and predetermined. The analogy he draws between the uncertainty that prevailed prior to Moses with respect to the date of the liberation from Egypt and the unpredictability of the date of the final redemption suggests that, like the period of enslavement in Egypt, the period of exile prior to the advent of the Messiah is of a fixed but incompletely known duration.

Maimonides shifts back and forth between intimating that the outbreak of the messianic redemption is imminent and cautioning the community against acting recklessly on the basis of such expectations. While he mentions the birth pangs of the Messiah and refers repeatedly to the apocalyptic book of Daniel, he warns against turning belief in the promised end into a program of political action.

Remember that even the date of the termination of the Egyptian exile was not precisely known and gave rise to differences of opinion. Although God fixed its duration in Scripture, where He says: *And they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years* [Gen. 15:13], some reckoned the period of four hundred years from the time of Jacob's arrival in Egypt, others dated it from the beginning of Israel's bondage, which happened seventy years later, and still others computed it from the time of the Covenant of the Pieces when this matter was divinely predicted to Abraham. At the expiration of four hundred years after this event, and thirty years before the appearance of Moses, a band of Israelites left Egypt because they believed that their exile had ended. The Egyptians slew and destroyed them, and the subjugation of the Israelites who remained was consequently aggravated, as we learn from our sages, the teachers of our national traditions. David, in fact, alluded to the vanquished Israelites who miscalculated the date of the redemption in the verse: *The Ephraimite bowmen turned back in the day of battle* [Ps. 78:9]. (p. 115)

The promised four-hundred-year period of enslavement was indeed the duration of Israel's bondage in Egypt. Yet, prior to Moses' appearance as the great liberator, no one could ascertain the starting point of the four-hundred-year period. All attempts at translating the promised liberation into a program of political action, like the premature uprising of the tribe of Ephraim, resulted in catastrophe and aggravated the nation's already terrible condition.

The implications of this account of the events preceding the liberation from Egypt were clearly relevant to the situation of the community in Yemen.

. . . Now if such uncertainty prevailed in regard to the date of emancipation from the Egyptian bondage, the term of which was fixed, it is much more so with respect to the date of the final redemption, the prolonged and protracted duration of which appalled and dismayed our inspired seers. (pp. 115–116)

The promise of redemption that Maimonides imparts to his audience conveys a sense of immediacy coupled with a warning to desist from action. Belief in a predetermined scheme of redemption is a legitimate basis of hope, but not of political action. On the one hand, Maimonides adduces a host of facts to support the contention that the community in Yemen was in fact living in premessianic times.

. . . The hour of his [the Messiah's] arrival will be at a time of great catastrophe and dire misfortune for Israel, as was predicted in the verse: *And neither bond nor free is left* [Deut. 32:36]. Then God will bring him forth and he will fulfill the promises made in his behalf. A later prophet too was alluding to the messianic tribulations when he declared: *But who can endure the day of his coming?* [Mal. 3:2]. This is the proper belief that one must hold.

From the prophecies of Daniel and Isaiah and from the statements of our sages it is clear that the advent of the Messiah will take place some time subsequent to the universal expansion of the Roman and Arab empires, which is an actuality today. This fact is true beyond question or doubt. (p. 121)

Yet, while pointing to such compelling signs of the messianic fulfillment, he immediately adds that "the precise date of the messianic advent cannot be known."

Toward the conclusion of the epistle, Maimonides mentions a further sign of the coming, namely, the proliferation of messianic pretenders, and again he quickly adds words of caution.

The prophets have predicted and instructed us, as I have told you, that pretenders and simulators will appear in great numbers at the time when the advent of the true Messiah will draw nigh, but they will not be able to make good their claim. They will perish with many of their partisans. Solomon of blessed memory, inspired by the Holy Spirit, foresaw that the prolonged duration of the exile would incite some of our people to seek to terminate

it before the appointed time, and as a consequence they would perish or meet with disaster. Therefore he admonished them and adjured them in metaphorical language to desist, as we read: *I adjure you, O maidens of Jerusalem, by gazelles or by hinds of the field: do not to wake or rouse love until it please* [Song of Songs 2:7]. Now, brethren and friends, abide by the oath, and stir not up love until it pleases. (p. 130)

In quoting the latter passage from the Song of Songs, Maimonides alludes to the following talmudic passage:

What was the purpose of those three adjurations [Song of Songs 2:7, 3:5, 5:8]? One, that Israel shall not go up [all together as if surrounded] by a wall; the second, that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured Israel that they shall not rebel against the nations of the world; and the third is that whereby the Holy One, blessed be He, adjured the idolators that they shall not oppress Israel too much. (BT Ketubbot 111a)

Despite the disgrace and oppression suffered at the hands of their enemies, the people of Israel are sworn to silence and forbearance.

Although we are dishonored by them beyond human endurance, and have to put up with their fabrications, we yet behave like him of whom the prophet said: *But I am like a deaf man, unhearing, like a dumb man who cannot speak up* [Ps. 38:14]. Similarly, our sages instructed us to bear the prevarications and lies of Ishmael in silence. They found it in a cryptic allusion to this attitude in the names of his sons, Mishma, Dumah, and Massa, which have been interpreted to mean *listen, be silent, and endure*. We have acquiesced, both young and old, to inure ourselves to humiliation, as Isaiah instructed us: *I offered my back to the floggers, and my cheeks to those who tore out my hair* [Isa. 50:6]. All this notwithstanding, we do not escape this continued maltreatment and pressure, which well-nigh crush us. No matter how much we suffer and elect to remain at peace with them, they stir up strife and sedition, as David describes: *I am all peace; but when I speak, they are for war* [Ps. 120:7]. Most certainly therefore if we start trouble, and claim power from them absurdly and preposterously, we surely give ourselves up to destruction. (p. 127)

Israel's response to persecution must be expressed in dignified restraint and hope for the promised redemption. While the consequences of such forbearance are continued suffering and degradation, the con-

sequences of active revolt are far worse. The theology of redemption implicit in the liberation from Egypt justifies hope and perseverance; it may not be translated into a political manifesto calling for immediate action.

Notwithstanding his words of caution, Maimonides offers the community many reasons for believing that the end to its suffering was near. Israel's very suffering points to redemption. Also many of the prevalent conditions of history seem to correspond to events that, according to tradition, signal the advent of the messianic redemption. While certainty as to the date of redemption is impossible, Israel's terrible suffering, the appearance of messianic pretenders, the emergence of the Arabic empire, and other events alluded to in the book of Daniel—all these signs reinforce the belief that the final redemption is ever so close.

As if not content with the imprecision of such proofs that messianic times were approaching, Maimonides goes a step further and divulges a secret "extraordinary tradition" that comes as close as possible to being a precise prediction of the onset of the messianic era. The tradition that Maimonides received from his father "who in turn received it from his father, going back to our early ancestors who were exiled from Jerusalem," sets the time of the return of prophecy at 1210 C.E., roughly forty-five years from the time he wrote the epistle.<sup>16</sup>

Lest one object that this tradition predicts merely the return of prophecy and not the commencement of the messianic era, Maimonides adds,

It is doubtless true that the reappearance of prophecy in Israel is one of the signs betokening the approach of the messianic era, as is stated: *After that I will pour out My spirit upon all flesh; your sons and daughters shall prophesy . . .* [Joel 3:1]. This is the most reliable tradition concerning the advent of the Messiah. I call it reliable, although I have admonished against it, and strictly prohibited blazoning it abroad, lest some people deem it unduly postponed. I have already apprised you concerning it, but God best knows what is true. (pp. 122–123)

The claim that the return of prophecy betokens the commencement of the messianic era is related to the fact that in the *Epistle to Yemen* the Messiah is portrayed as a prophetic figure. By describing the Messiah as a great prophet ("The Messiah indeed ranks above all prophets after Moses in eminence and distinction") Maimonides in effect neutralizes the appeal of messianic pretenders who could not but lack the extraordinary characteristics of the true Messiah.

The description of the messianic figure in the *Epistle to Yemen* serves

as a paradigm by which to evaluate critically the claims of false Messiahs. First, the Messiah must perform miracles that prove beyond any shadow of doubt that he is the true Messiah.

What the great powers are that all the prophets from Moses to Malachi ascribe to the Messiah may be inferred from various statements in the twenty-four books of Scripture. The most significant of them is that the report of his advent will strike terror into the hearts of all the kings of the earth, and their kingdoms will fall; neither will they be able to war or revolt against him. They will neither defame nor calumniate him, for the miracles he will perform will frighten them into complete silence. (p. 125)

Second, the Messiah must possess great wisdom and knowledge. Maimonides castigates the rabbi addressed in the epistle for not dismissing out of hand the claim of a certain messianic pretender by virtue of his ignorance.

But I am astonished that you, a scholar who has carefully studied the doctrine of the rabbis, are inclined to repose faith in him. Do you not know, my brother, that the Messiah is a very eminent prophet, more illustrious than all the prophets after Moses? . . .

Now if we dare not put trust in a man's pretensions to prophecy if he does not excel in wisdom, how much less must we take seriously the claims of an ignoramus that he is the Messiah. (pp. 123-124)

Furthermore, the Messiah must first appear in the land of Israel and not in Yemen or other places in the Diaspora.

After his manifestation in Palestine, Israel will be gathered in Jerusalem and the other cities of Palestine. Then the tidings will spread to the East and to the West until it will reach Yemen and those beyond you in India, as we learn from Isaiah: *Go, swift messengers, to a nation far and remote, to a people thrust forth and away. . . which sends out envoys by sea, in papyrus vessels upon the water* [Isa. 18:2]. The redemption will not be reversed so that it will appear in distant lands first, and ultimately reach Palestine. (p. 125)

Although the readers of the epistle are told to expect the Messiah's arrival in the near future, they are presented with a description of the messianic figure that destroys the credibility of existing messianic pretenders. Maimonides once again drives a wedge between hopeful ex-



pectancy of the Messiah and political behavior predicated on such hope. While building up the community's hope in the approaching return of prophecy and by implication in the advent of the true Messiah, Maimonides protects the community against being duped by charismatic messianic pretenders by portraying the Messiah as an idealized prophetic figure.

### MESSIANISM IN THE WORKS OF MAIMONIDES

Maimonides' approach to messianism in the *Epistle to Yemen* is closely linked to a predeterministic and necessitarian concept of history, unlike his treatment of messianism in particular and history in general in other works. This difference further confirms the thesis that the *Epistle to Yemen* reflects the particular audience that Maimonides was addressing.

In contrast to this thesis, Amos Funkenstein's article "Maimonides' Political Theory and Realistic Messianism" uses the *Epistle to Yemen* as a frame of reference for understanding Maimonides' overall philosophy of history.<sup>17</sup> Funkenstein states explicitly: "We shall rather treat all of Maimonides' assertions in the matter as part of one comprehensive theory."<sup>18</sup> In this connection, he cites the theory of the "divine ruse" that Maimonides used in the *Guide of the Perplexed* to explain why the Torah contains many commandments whose rational basis is not evident at first sight. Their purpose, according to the *Guide*, was to wean the original Israelite community away from idolatrous worship. God knew that the Sinai generation would not accept a radical break with the religious practices of the time. He therefore adapted those practices to the worship of Himself, with the intention of leading the community on to higher forms of worship gradually in the course of history. Funkenstein discerns a similar historical "divine ruse" in the *Epistle to Yemen*: just as God used existing forms of worship as means to further the realization of higher forms of worship, God promotes the emergence of Christianity and Islam as vehicles for preparing the world for the eventual triumph of monotheism in the form of Judaism.<sup>19</sup>

Given Maimonides' rejection of the eternal rule of necessity as an explanatory principle in natural science and metaphysics and his consequent commitment to a type of indeterminacy in being, he was able, according to Funkenstein, to subscribe to a theory of history that was in certain respects similar to Hegel's notion of the cunning of reason.

Just as Hegel's "objektiver Geist" uses the subjective, egotistic freedom of man to further the objective goals of history (for otherwise history would cease to be "Fortschritt im Bewusstsein der

Freiheit”), so also Maimonides’ God fights polytheism with its own weapons and uses elements of its worship as a fruitful deceit. Maimonides spoke of the “cunning of God” (“’ormat hasem utebunato; talattuf fi’allahu”) where Hegel will speak of the “cunning of reason” (“List der Vernunft”). . . . Maimonides, as all other medieval versions of the divine economy, allows at best a relative autonomy to the collective evolution of man.<sup>20</sup>

Without going into the reasons why this analogy between Maimonides and Hegel is questionable,<sup>21</sup> an attempt will be made to show that the *Epistle to Yemen* cannot be treated as a paradigm of Maimonides’ theory of messianism or history. Maimonides did not espouse a comprehensive theory of history. On the contrary, a careful analysis of the *Guide of the Perplexed* would show that a predeterministic theory of history based on the notions of divine cunning and an end to history is foreign to Maimonidean thought.<sup>22</sup> Such an analysis, however, is beyond the scope of this discussion, which is restricted to the disparities between Maimonides’ theory of messianism and of human autonomy as presented in the *Epistle to Yemen* and his treatment of the same themes in his commentary to the tenth chapter of Sanhedrin (*Helek*) and in sections of the *Mishneh Torah*. It will be seen that Maimonides argues differently depending on whether he writes within a context of suffering or whether he writes in order to move his audience toward a higher level of worship of God.

#### MESSIANISM IN *HELEK*

The central issue Maimonides deals with in *Helek* is that of the meaning and purpose of commitment to the Torah. At the very beginning of *Helek*, he points to a general confusion regarding the true purpose of fulfilling the commandments.

I have thought fit to speak here concerning many principles belonging to fundamental articles of faith which are of very great importance. Know that the theologians are divided in opinion as to the good which man reaps from the performance of these precepts which God enjoined upon us by the hand of Moses our teacher; and that they also differ among themselves with regard to the evil which will overtake us if we transgress them. Their differences on these questions are very great and in proportion to the differences between their respective intellects. As a consequence, people’s opinions have fallen into such great confusion that you can scarcely in any way find any one possessing clear and certain ideas on this subject; neither can you alight upon any portion of it which has been transmitted to any person without abundant error.<sup>23</sup>

He then proceeds to discuss various classes of thinkers who base their eschatological expectations on literal interpretations of biblical and rabbinic texts. One class "holds that the hoped-for good will be the Garden of Eden, a place where people eat and drink without toil or faintness." They imagine "houses of costly stones . . . couches of silk and rivers flowing with wine and perfumed oil."

A second class

. . . firmly believes and imagines that the hoped-for good will be the days of the Messiah . . . They think that when that time comes all men will be kings for ever. Their bodily frames will be mighty and they will inhabit the whole earth unto eternity. According to their imagination, that Messiah will live as long as the Creator . . . and at that epoch the earth will bring forth garments ready woven and bread ready baked, and many other impossible things like these.

A third class believes that the ultimate good is the resurrection of the dead: "that man will live after his death; that in the company of his family and relatives he will once again eat and drink and never more die."

A fourth class consists of those who believe that

the good which we shall reap from obedience to the Law will consist in the repose of the body and the attainment in this world of all worldly wishes, as, for example, the fertility of lands, abundant wealth, abundance of children, long life, bodily health and security, enjoying the sway of a king, and prevailing over the oppressor.<sup>24</sup>

The common feature of all these views is their focusing on material gratification as the ultimate goal of religious observance. The popular notion of messianism was but one instance of this preoccupation with gratifying one's need for power, wealth, or sensual pleasure. It was a collective fantasy born of repression and deprivation.

Maimonides then states that the ultimate purpose of the Torah, ignored by all the aforementioned views, is the world to come, i.e., the immortality of the soul. As shown in the analysis of the *Essay on Resurrection*, the world to come, *olam ha-ba*, was for him the embodiment of the ideals of knowledge and love of God, since then the soul will eternally know and love God.

Maimonides' goal in *Helek* was to reeducate the community to regard disinterested worship of God as the ultimate goal of Judaism. To achieve this, he had to break the hold of literalism on the minds of the majority

of the community. In order to convince them that knowledge and love of God for their own sakes constituted the ultimate purpose of the commandments, he offered his readers a new perspective on the material benefits promised in the Bible and rabbinic literature. After elaborating on the meaning of the world to come and of worship for its own sake (*li-shmah*), Maimonides explains the biblical promises of material rewards as follows:

As regards the promises and threats alluded to in the Torah, their interpretation is that which I shall now tell you. It says to you, "If you obey these precepts, I will help you to a further obedience of them and perfection in the performance of them. And I shall remove all hindrances from you." For it is impossible for man to do the service of God when sick or hungry or thirsty or in trouble, and this is why the Torah promises the removal of all these disabilities and gives man also the promise of health and quietude until such a time as he shall have attained perfection of knowledge and be worthy of the life of the world to come. The final aim of the Torah is not that the earth should be fertile, that people should live long, and that bodies should be healthy. It simply helps us to the performance of its precepts by holding out the promise of all these things.<sup>25</sup>

Maimonides tried to accomplish two tasks in *Helek*. First and foremost, he sought to alter the community's attitude to Judaism by making disinterested worship—knowledge and love of God—the ultimate goal. He tried to make *olam ha-ba* the highest good in the hierarchy of "rewards" that Judaism promises to its adherents and to make all other goods, including those of the messianic age, subservient to it. He therefore ascribes instrumental value to messianism. Messianism offers a community conditions that free its members of mundane worries and distractions so that they can devote themselves to the single-minded pursuit of knowledge of God.

The days of the Messiah are not ardently longed for on account of the plentiful vegetation, and the riches which they will bring in their train, nor in order that we may ride on horses, nor that we may drink to the accompaniment of various kinds of musical instruments, as is thought by those people who are confused in their ideas on such things. No! the prophets and saints wished and ardently desired [the days of the Messiah] because it implies the coming together of the virtuous, with choice deeds of goodness and knowledge, and the justice of the king, the greatness of his wisdom and his nearness to his Creator, as it is said: "The Lord said unto me, thou art my son; this day have I begotten

thee." And because it implies obedience to all the laws of Moses, without ennui or disquietude or constraint, as it is promised in the words, "And they shall teach no more every man his neighbour and every man his brother saying, Know the Lord; for they shall all know me from the least of them unto the greatest of them." "And I will take away the stony heart from your flesh." And there are many more similar verses on like themes.

It is under conditions like these that one will obtain a firm hold upon the world to come. The final goal is the attaining to the world to come, and it is to it that the effort must be directed.<sup>26</sup>

Second, he strove to neutralize religious fantasy. He tried to counteract the exaggerated expectations fostered by biblical and midrashic literature and naturalize the concept of messianism by interpreting it in terms of the regular patterns of nature. Wherever possible, he made the content of messianic beliefs consistent with the order of nature by allegorizing prophetic and rabbinic statements that in their literal sense placed messianism beyond the natural order.

Maimonides states expressly that the Messiah himself will be mortal and that the longevity that people will enjoy in the messianic era will be a perfectly natural consequence of the conditions that will then obtain.

But the Messiah will die, and his son and son's son will reign in his stead. God has clearly declared his death in the words, "He shall not fail nor be discouraged, till he have set judgment in the earth." His kingdom will endure a very long time and the lives of men will be long also, because longevity is a consequence of the removal of sorrows and cares. Let not the fact of the duration of his kingdom for thousands of years seem strange to you, for the sages have said that when a number of good things come together it is not an easy thing for them to separate again.<sup>27</sup>

The length of days that people will enjoy during the messianic era need not imply a miraculous change in the natural order. When human society is free of violence, when people are not burdened psychologically by anxieties resulting from scarcity and the struggle for survival, and when people become conscious of their true human purpose, i.e., to know God, then that society will be stable and ordered and its members will enjoy lengthy and satisfying lives.

Although in *Helek* Maimonides naturalized the messianic era to a great extent, he did not altogether allegorize the powers traditionally ascribed to the messianic figure.



His [the Messiah's] name will be great and fill the earth to its uttermost bounds. It will be a greater name than that of King Solomon and mightier. The nations will make peace with him and lands will obey him by reason of his great rectitude and the wonders that will come to light by his means. Any one that rises up against him God will destroy and make him fall into his hand.<sup>28</sup>

Maimonides is vague with respect to the "wonders that will come to light by his means." Although he alludes to this miraculous aspect of the Messiah's influence over the nations of the world, he immediately adds:

So far as existing things are concerned there will be no difference whatever between now and then, except that Israel will possess the kingdom. And this is the sense of the rabbis' statement: "There is no difference between this world and the days of the Messiah except the subjugation of the kingdoms alone." In his days there will be both the strong and the weak in their relations to others. But verily in those days the gaining of their livelihood will be so very easy to men that they will do the lightest possible labor and reap great benefit. It is this that is meant by the remark of the rabbis, "The land of Israel will one day produce cakes ready baked, and garments of fine silk." For when one finds a thing easily and without labor, people are in the habit of saying, "So and so found bread ready baked, and a meal ready cooked."<sup>29</sup>

The net result of the argument presented in *Ḥelek* is that the messianic age is not the ultimate good promised by Judaism, but rather an instrument serving the true purpose of the commandments: the world to come. The latter is to be attained through worship of God grounded in love and not in fear of punishment or anticipation of reward, a level of worship to which it will be easier for the people to rise in the messianic age. Messianism is thus a worthwhile inspiration insofar as it enables man to realize his nature. By emptying messianism of miraculous connotations as much as he could and by reevaluating its importance in terms of the true end of Judaism, Maimonides sought to alter the community's orientation to Judaism by setting knowledge and disinterested worship of God at the center of their religious world view.

#### MESSIANISM IN THE MISHNEH TORAH

*Hilkhot Teshuvah* The final chapters of *Hilkhot Teshuvah* have some relevance to the theme of messianism, starting with a brief reference

in chapter seven. The context is a forceful description of the importance of *teshuvah*, repentance. "Since every human being . . . has free will," writes Maimonides, "a person should strive to repent." Everyone should imagine that death is imminent and thus be impelled to repent immediately. *Teshuvah* is not restricted to actions, but includes character traits and dispositions that are often graver and more resistant to change than sinful acts; it involves the transformation of a total personality. A person who does *teshuvah* is not inferior to a person who never sinned: "The sages say: 'Where penitents stand, the completely righteous cannot stand' " (BT Berakhot 34b).

In the midst of this elaboration on the value and urgency of *teshuvah*, Maimonides adduces the biblical calls for repentance.

All the prophets charged the people concerning repentance. Only through repentance will Israel be redeemed, and the Torah already offered the assurance that Israel will, in the closing period of his exile, finally repent and thereupon be immediately redeemed. (*MT Hilkhoh Teshuvah* 7:5)

The chapter then continues with an impassioned description of the power of *teshuvah* to restore a person from being abhorred and estranged from God to being "beloved, desirable, near to God, a friend."

The force of this chapter is clearly persuasive, to inspire and rouse people to appreciate the importance of *teshuvah*. It would therefore be mistaken to infer from Maimonides' brief remark on the divine promise that in the end of its exile Israel will repent and thereupon be redeemed, that Maimonides held an eschatological view of history or, as Gershom Scholem claims, that he believed that: "It is not Israel's repentance which brings about the redemption; rather because the eruption of redemption is to occur by divine decree, at the last moment there also erupts a movement of repentance in Israel itself."<sup>30</sup> The dominant focus of this chapter is upon the individual's everyday struggle with the destructive influence of sin and the possibilities for personal renewal through *teshuvah*. Maimonides is not here dealing independently with the theme of Israel's historical redemption. In the midst of his impassioned description of the greatness of *teshuvah* for the individual sinner, he invokes the prophetic call to *teshuvah* and the inseparable connection between redemption and repentance. In invoking the authority of the Torah and the prophets, he reinforces his exhortation to personal repentance.

In the eighth chapter, Maimonides states that life in the world to come is the ultimate goal of Judaism. Then the soul will exist forever in an immaterial state. Since it is rather material rewards and punishments that are emphasized in the biblical promises, the ninth chapter

explains that such promises are only a means of encouraging people to achieve the ultimate goal. In chapter ten, Maimonides discusses the notions of love and fear of God and concludes the "Book of Knowledge" with what might be considered its central motif: "One only loves God with the knowledge with which one knows Him. According to the knowledge, will be the love."

In the discussions of these three chapters, the context in which the theme of messianism is introduced is the ninth chapter, where Maimonides is seeking to show that the material rewards promised in the Torah are of instrumental value alone. Accordingly, the purpose ascribed to the messianic age is basically the same as in *Helek*: to make it easier for the people to know and love God.

Hence all Israelites, their prophets and sages, longed for the advent of messianic times, that they might have relief from the wicked tyranny that does not permit them properly to occupy themselves with the study of the Torah and the observance of the commandments; that they might have ease, devote themselves to getting wisdom, and thus attain to life in the world to come. For in those days, knowledge, wisdom and truth will increase, as it is said, *For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord* [Isa. 11:9], and it is said, *They will no more teach everyone his brother and everyone his neighbor* [Jer. 31:34], and further, *I will remove the heart of stone from your flesh* [Ezek. 36:26].

Because the king who will arise from the seed of David will possess more wisdom than Solomon and will be a great prophet, approaching Moses, our teacher, he will teach the whole of the Jewish people and instruct them in the way of God; and all nations will come to hear him, as it is said, *And at the end of days it shall come to pass that the Mount of the Lord's house shall be established as the top of the mountains* [Mic. 4:1, Isa. 2:2]. (*MT Hilkhoh Teshuvah* 9:8–10)

Maimonides does not mention the terror that the Messiah will strike into the hearts of the nations of the world, as he does in the *Epistle to Yemen*. Nor does he mention the Messiah's producing great miracles, as he does in *Helek* as well as the epistle. Because this treatment of messianism is aimed at showing its instrumental value, Maimonides stresses the teaching role of the messianic figure. Rather than being terrified by his miracles, the nations of the world will be drawn to him by virtue of his great wisdom: "all nations will come to hear him."

The main point is thus that whenever material well-being is promised or hoped for in Judaism, it is not regarded as an end in itself, but rather as a means for furthering knowledge and love of God. Mes-

sianic times are desired because the conditions that will obtain then will be conducive to becoming worthy of life in the world to come. It is realism and not materialism that accounts for Judaism's concern for material well-being; human beings cannot devote themselves to the pursuit of knowledge or disinterested worship of God when they are overburdened with physical and psychological concerns.

One may conclude, therefore, that Maimonides' description of the Messiah in the ninth chapter was dictated by the central theme of chapters eight through ten. Rather than expound a theory of messianism as such, Maimonides states only its relationship to the ultimate purpose of Judaism.

*"Kings and Wars"* Maimonides' most elaborate treatment of messianism is in "Kings and Wars," a part of the "Book of Judges." He devotes two entire chapters to a detailed description of the messianic figure and his basic task: the establishment of a society conducive to the attainment of "an understanding of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human mind." The only miraculous power ascribed to the Messiah is that, by virtue of possessing *ruah ha-kodesh*, the Holy Spirit, he will be able to determine who among the descendants of the tribe of Levi are priests and who are ordinary Levites. Then the temple can be rebuilt and the sacrificial cult reinstituted. The miraculous aspect of the messianic figure is thus confined to an internal halakhic requirement, namely, the determination of the members of the priestly class for the sake of restoring a traditional Jewish kingdom. The contrast with the external focus of the miraculous powers ascribed to the Messiah in the *Epistle to Yemen* is striking: there the Messiah's miracles are directed at terrifying and subduing the nations of the world.

In order to place Maimonides' description of the messianic figure in "Kings and Wars" in its proper perspective, one must consider the implications of his treatment of the Messiah as a king figure. Although only the two final chapters of "Kings and Wars" deal exclusively with the messianic period, the preceeding ten contain features that bear upon the Messiah's role as a king. Already in the first chapter, Maimonides distinguishes between kings of the House of David and those selected from the rest of Israel, e.g., "the kings of the House of David will endure forever" (1:9). This distinction underlies the halakhic requirement that *melekh ha-mashiah*, the king Messiah, be a descendant of David.

Whether or not the king is Davidic, his primary functions are both temporal and spiritual. He must provide social and political stability and security, but also establish the sovereignty of the Torah over his entire kingdom. Because he is an instrument for extending the rule of

the Torah, he may not use his power for the sake of personal aggrandizement. This limitation on the king's accumulation of wealth and power is a recurrent theme in Maimonides' discussion of monarchy.<sup>31</sup>

While according the king considerable freedom in using the power at his disposal, Maimonides tries to set limits to his use of that power by educating the king to view himself as a messenger of God sent to establish a community spiritually committed to the way of the Torah.

Just as Scripture accords great honor to the king and bids all pay him honor, so it bids him cultivate a humble and lowly spirit, as it is written: *And my heart is humbled within me* [Ps. 109:22]. He must not exercise his authority in a supercilious manner, as it is said: *that his heart be not lifted up above his brethren* [Deut. 17:20]. He should deal graciously and compassionately with the small and the great, conduct their affairs in their best interests, be wary of the honor of even the lowliest. When he addresses the public collectively, he shall use gentle language, as did David when he said: *Hear me, my brethren, and my people* [1 Chron. 28:2]. It is also written: *If thou wilt be a servant unto this people this day . . . then they will be thy servants forever* [1 Kings 12:7]. At all times, his conduct should be marked by a spirit of great humility. None was greater than Moses, our teacher; yet he said: *And what are we? Your murmurings are not against us* [Exod. 16:8]. He should put up with the cumbrances, burdens, grumblings, and anger of the people as a nursing father puts up with a suckling child. The Bible styles the king "shepherd," [as it is written] *to be shepherd over Jacob His people* [Ps. 78:71]. The way in which a shepherd acts is explicitly stated in the prophetic text: *Even as a shepherd that feedeth his flock, that gathereth the lambs in his arms, and carrieth them in his bosom and gently leadeth those that give suck* [Isa. 40:11]. ("Kings and Wars" 2:6)

In the fourth chapter, Maimonides discusses the king's right to levy taxes, to conscript an army and wage war, to take wives and concubines from among the captives, to confiscate property, and so on. The Messiah, he adds, will have a further prerogative.

The king Messiah will receive one-thirteenth of all the provinces to be conquered by Israel. This is the share that will be assigned to him and his descendants forever. ("Kings and Wars" 4:8)

The chapter then continues with other laws pertaining to kings in general. The incidental mention of the Messiah in the midst of a chapter on the prerogatives of any ruling monarch indicates that the concept of Messiah is but one form of the general halakhic concept of



kingship. While the king Messiah has special rights and privileges, he is nonetheless a member of the halakhically defined class of kings.<sup>32</sup>

The fifth chapter deals with the legal status of the wars waged by the king. A war is said to be "obligatory" (*milhemet mitzvah*) if it is waged against Amalek, or against the seven nations inhabiting the Promised Land in the time of Moses, or if it is waged in order to deliver Israel from attacking enemies. The king may also engage in an "optional war" (*milhemet reshut*) in order to "extend the borders of Israel and to enhance his greatness and prestige." According to the sixth chapter, the following condition pertains to all declarations of war:

No war is declared against any nation before peace offers are made to it. This obtains both in an optional war and a war for a religious cause. . . . If the inhabitants make peace and accept the seven commandments enjoined upon the descendants of Noah, none of them is slain. . . . ("Kings and Wars" 6:1)

The Rabad questioned Maimonides' requirement that the seven commandments of Noah (the fundamental principles incumbent upon all human beings according to Halakhah) be imposed upon nations as a result of an optional war waged beyond the immediate borders of Israel.<sup>33</sup> Whatever the sources of Maimonides' decision, his extending the imposition of the Noahidic commandment to optional wars shows that he regarded the promotion of monotheism as a universal norm. The Noahidic commandments, which prohibit idolatry and enjoin certain fundamental norms of social justice, comprised what Maimonides believed to be the essential conditions necessary for a universal monotheistic world order. The obligation to enforce them was unconditional and thus could not be confined to the geographical borders of Israel and its surroundings.<sup>34</sup>

In the ninth chapter, Maimonides expounds his understanding of the twofold framework of norms—the Torah and the seven commandments of Noah—that must govern a monotheistic kingdom under Judaism.

Moses, our teacher, bequeathed the law and commandments to Israel, as it is said: *an inheritance of the congregation of Jacob* [Deut. 33:4], and to those of other nations who are willing to be converted [to Judaism], as it is said: *One Law and one ordinance shall be both for you, and for the resident alien* [Num. 15:16]. But no coercion to accept the Law and commandments is practiced on those who are unwilling to do so. Moreover Moses, our teacher, was commanded by God to compel all human beings to

accept the commandments enjoined upon the descendants of Noah. Anyone who does not accept them is put to death. ("Kings and Wars" 8:10)

Mosaic prophecy not only enjoins a code of laws upon a particular community but also obligates that community to rid the entire world of idolatry and to establish the universal sovereignty of God as mediated through Moses and Israel. There is possibly a polemical aspect to this position insofar as it recognizes only Sinaitic revelation as the exclusive source for validating obedience to the Noahic laws.<sup>35</sup>

A heathen who accepts the seven commandments and observes them scrupulously is a "righteous heathen," and will have a portion in the world to come, provided that he accepts them and performs them because the Holy One, blessed be He, commanded them in the Law and made known through Moses, our teacher, that the observance thereof had been enjoined upon the descendants of Noah even before the Law was given. But if his observance thereof is based upon a reasoned conclusion he is not deemed a resident alien, or one of the pious of the gentiles, but one of their wise men. ("Kings and Wars" 8:11)

We turn now to Maimonides' description of the king Messiah in the eleventh and twelfth chapters of "Kings and Wars." Messianism is here placed within the framework of the general concept of kingship expounded in the previous chapters. While it is the task of every Jewish king to promote the rule of the Torah within the borders of Israel and the Noahic commandments among the gentiles, the messianic age will be characterized by the complete achievement of those goals. Just as Maimonides earlier cautioned the king against misusing his power, so too does he caution the community against viewing that age in self-serving material terms alone.

The sages and prophets did not long for the days of the Messiah that Israel might exercise dominion over the world, or rule over the heathens, or be exalted by the nations, or that it might eat and drink and rejoice. Their aspiration was that Israel be free to devote itself to the Law and its wisdom, with no one to oppress or disturb it, and thus be worthy of life in the world to come.

In that era, there will be neither famine nor war, neither jealousy nor strife. Blessings will be abundant, comforts within the reach of all. The one preoccupation of the whole world will be to know the Lord. Hence Israelites will be very wise, they will know the things that are now concealed and will attain an understanding of their Creator to the utmost capacity of the human

mind, as it is written: *For the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea* [Isa. 11:9]. ("Kings and Wars" 12:4-5)

By attaching a transcendent purpose to the community's dream for national rebirth, Maimonides in effect undermines the legitimacy of triumphal nationalism. He neutralizes the natural longing for wealth, power, and supremacy over other nations by making the self-transcending ideal of knowledge of God the focal point of messianic hope. As love on the individual level signifies a person's ability to transcend egocentric drives and interests, so messianism on the national level signifies a people's ability to transcend collective egotism by establishing a society conducive to the unfolding of a person's human essence through the knowledge and love of God.<sup>36</sup>

Maimonides allows for the possibility that new Jewish kings may arise in the land of Israel before the coming of the Messiah himself. The Messiah is thus not pictured as a prophetic figure performing spectacular miracles as in the *Epistle to Yemen*, but rather as one among a series of kings who will follow him and perhaps also precede him. What distinguishes him is his success in restoring Jewish national life in all its aspects and abolishing idolatry throughout the world.

The king Messiah will arise and restore the kingdom of David to its former state and original sovereignty. He will rebuild the sanctuary and gather the dispersed of Israel. All the ancient laws will be reinstituted in his days; sacrifices will again be offered; the sabbatical and jubilee years will again be observed in accordance with the commandments set forth in the Law. ("Kings and Wars" 11:1)

The king Messiah is meant to realize the full scope of Mosaic prophecy including sacrifices and the temple cult. He is not a messenger announcing a new revelation or radical change in the natural order. Nor is he the harbinger of an end to history. He is simply the ideal embodiment of the halakhic conception of the king, who will fulfill the essential purpose of all kings by reestablishing a national kingdom governed by the Law of Moses. Maimonides' description of the Messiah thus parallels his conception of messianism as the means of an ideal fulfillment (i.e., implementation) of the Torah. He therefore emphasizes that the Law will in no way be abrogated during the messianic age, but indeed will be restored in its entirety.

Messianism is the fulfillment of the biblical promise that Israel will be given the historical opportunity to observe the entire Torah. This

promise, as interpreted by Maimonides, does not presuppose an eschatological end to history as we know it.

Do not think that the king Messiah will have to perform signs and wonders, bring anything new into being, revive the dead, or do similar things. It is not so. Rabbi Akiva was a great sage, a teacher of the Mishnah, yet he was also the armor-bearer of Ben Kozba. He affirmed that the latter was the king Messiah; he and all the wise men of his generation shared this belief until Ben Kozba was slain in [his] iniquity, when it became known that he was not [the Messiah]. Yet the rabbis had not asked him for a sign or token. The general principle is: this Law of ours with its statutes and ordinances [is not subject to change]. It is forever and all eternity; it is not to be added to or to be taken away from. ("Kings and Wars" 11:3)

In stating that miracles are not a necessary condition for identifying someone as the true Messiah, Maimonides is not merely engaging in polemics (e.g., to circumvent Christian claims that Jesus performed miracles), but seeking to naturalize the transition between pre-messianic and messianic history.<sup>37</sup> He also upholds the attitude of those sages who considered Bar Kokhba (Ben Kozba) to be the Messiah. Since the king Messiah does not inaugurate a radically changed history, Rabbi Akiva initially may have had grounds for concluding that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah. There is a perennial obligation to support legitimate attempts to restore Israel's national independence, because a national political framework is indispensable for the fulfillment of the Torah. Hence, Maimonides' statement about the eternity and unalterability of the Torah ("The general principle is: this law of ours . . . is not subject to change") summarizes the fundamental principle underlying his conception of messianism: Jews are obligated to try to establish a national framework in which the total corpus of Torah Law can be concretely implemented in the world.<sup>38</sup>

The difference from a halakhic point of view between an ordinary king of the House of David and the king Messiah depends to a great extent on the latter's success at fulfilling the tasks imposed on all kings. Maimonides enumerates various conditions that a king must fulfill in order to be regarded as a *prima facie* candidate for being the Messiah.

If there arise a king from the House of David who mediates on the Torah, occupies himself with the commandments, as did his ancestor David, observes the precepts prescribed in the Written and the Oral Law, prevails upon Israel to walk in the way of the

Lord, it may be assumed that he is the Messiah. ("Kings and Wars" 11:4)

The criteria for concluding that the king in question is unquestionably the Messiah mirror the functions that the Halakhah ascribes to all kings. Like an ordinary king, the king Messiah will seek to provide Israel with political security, inspire the community to observe the Torah, and "fight the battles of the Lord" by abolishing idolatry wherever his power extends. He will differ from ordinary kings in his success at realizing these goals in a convincing manner.

If he does these things and succeeds, rebuilds the sanctuary on its site, and gathers the dispersed of Israel, he is beyond all doubt the Messiah. He will prepare the whole world to serve the Lord with one accord, as it is written: *For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent* [Zeph. 3:9]. ("Kings and Wars" 11:4)

What if he fails to pass some of these tests? The answer of Maimonides is given in a passage found in only a few manuscripts of "Kings and Wars."

But if he does not meet with full success, or is slain, it is obvious that he is not the Messiah promised in the Torah. He is to be regarded like all the other wholehearted and worthy kings of the House of David who died and whom the Holy One, blessed be He, raised up to test the multitude, as it is written: *And some of them that are wise shall stumble, to refine among them, and to purify, and to make white, even to the time of the end; for it is yet for the time appointed* [Dan. 11:35].<sup>39</sup>

Accordingly, one must await the verdict of history to know whether a successful king from the House of David is the true Messiah. If the person in question ultimately fails, he remains a king figure though not a messianic figure. It is clear, therefore, why Maimonides did not censure Rabbi Akiva for presuming that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah. The restoration of political independence to Israel is a perennial normative ideal that gives expression to the ultimate goals of Judaism. This ideal must be acted upon whenever historical conditions allow. Failure is not a sign that the presumed Messiah is a false Messiah in the pejorative sense. The verse quoted by Maimonides from Daniel does not condemn the presumed messianic king for this failure, but rather explains such failures against the background of the messianic



promise. Since Daniel predicted such failures, one ought not to be disillusioned or feel divinely rejected when such well-meaning attempts at restoring Israel's independence do not meet with success.

In his philosophic and legal writings Maimonides makes the rabbinic statement: "The world conforms to its usual course," the cornerstone of his philosophy of history and nature. He dispenses almost entirely with miracles in explaining natural phenomena and chooses instead to merge the notion of divine will with the notion of the natural order. Divine love and concern are built into the belief in God's creation of an ordered universe.<sup>40</sup>

Accordingly, messianism does not involve a rupture in nature or history. The messianic kingdom endures not because of a radical transformation of man, but rather as a natural consequence of a just and peaceful organization of society. A messianic society does not eliminate uncertainty and contingency. While it provides a framework conducive to the fulfillment of the goals of Judaism, it does not guarantee their fulfillment nor does it limit the potential misuse of freedom. Although a potential messianic figure may begin a process that appears to lead towards the messianic fulfillment, he may fail at a later stage. A Maimonidean halakhist is willing to participate in such exciting historical opportunities because of his overriding concern and commitment to realize his normative obligations.

Messianism in the *Mishneh Torah* is explained primarily in terms of the meaning of a halakhic society rather than as the supernatural fulfillment of a predetermined divine plan. The commitment to the 613 commandments creates the need for an autonomous political commonwealth, i.e., messianism.

Maimonides mentions the restoration of the temple and the sacrificial cult during the messianic age not only because of their religious significance per se, but because they constitute parts of the total system of Halakhah that provides the rationale for messianism. (The sacrificial cult and the laws of the sabbatical and Jubilee years are not operative during exile and dispersion of the community.) For Maimonides, messianism grows out of the conceptual matrix of normative Judaism and not necessarily out of an eschatological aspiration for a new creation that would eliminate the possibility of evil in history.

*The Role of Christianity and Islam* The passage last quoted was generally expurgated, because it goes on to discuss Jesus and Muhammad as examples of false Messiahs.

Even of Jesus of Nazareth, who imagined that he was the Messiah, but was put to death by the court, Daniel had prophesied,

as it is written: *And the children of the violent among thy people shall lift themselves up to establish the vision; but they shall stumble* [Dan. 11:14]. For has there ever been a greater stumbling than this? All the prophets affirmed that the Messiah would redeem Israel, save them, gather their dispersed, and confirm the commandments. But he caused Israel to be destroyed by the sword, their remnant to be dispersed and humiliated. He was instrumental in changing the Torah and causing the world to err and serve another beside God.

But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts. All these matters relating to Jesus of Nazareth and the Ishmaelite [Muhammad] who came after him, only served to clear the way for King Messiah, to prepare the whole world to worship God with one accord, as it is written: *For then will I turn to the peoples a pure language, that they may all call upon the name of the Lord to serve Him with one consent* [Zeph. 3:9]. Thus the messianic hope, the Torah, and the commandments have become familiar topics—topics of conversation [among the inhabitants] of the far isles and many peoples, uncircumcised of heart and flesh. They are discussing these matters and the commandments of the Torah. Some say: “Those commandments were true, but have lost their validity and are no longer binding.” Others declare that they had an esoteric meaning and were not intended to be taken literally, that the Messiah has already come and revealed their occult significance. But when the true King Messiah will appear and succeed, be exalted and lifted up, they will forthwith recant and realize that they have inherited naught but lies from their fathers, that their prophets and forbears led them astray.<sup>41</sup>

Maimonides’ treatment of Christianity and Islam here deserves special attention, particularly because it differs so strikingly from what he says in the *Epistle to Yemen*.<sup>42</sup> One can only offer conjectures about what Maimonides intended in this passage. He himself makes it clear that his interpretation of the emergence of the two religions is based more on speculation than on knowledge. The limitations of human understanding preclude the possibility of acquiring knowledge of God’s ways in history: “But it is beyond the human mind to fathom the designs of the Creator; for our ways are not His ways, neither are our thoughts His thoughts.”

After introducing this note of caution, Maimonides presents an account of Christianity and Islam that presupposes, as Funkenstein interprets it, a divine cunning manipulating the surface occurrences of history. Yet if Maimonides had intended to convey the notion of a

divine cunning in history, as Funkenstein believes, one would have to conclude that God was immoral and diabolic. It would be sheer perversity for God to elect Israel and then deliberately unleash forces in history to inflict suffering upon Israel in order to bring about Israel's eventual triumph. According to this alleged scheme, Israel is chosen and then persecuted by God for the sake of realizing the divine goal in history. It is unlikely that Maimonides would accept a conception of history that was indifferent to moral considerations.<sup>43</sup> All of Maimonides' statements, moreover, are compatible with the view that God had not preordained the activities of Jesus and Muhammad, but was simply committed to frustrating their attempts to frustrate the divine promises to Israel. Their successes might seem irreversible, yet even those successes could turn to the benefit of this chosen people.

Rather than offering a theology of history, Maimonides was making two important points. First, he was cautioning his audience against misconstruing Christianity's and Islam's strength and expansion as signs of their truth. Since he had just spoken of the duty of Jews to promote the worldwide rule of monotheism, and since Christianity and Islam were by then so much more powerful and widespread than Judaism, some of his readers might ask themselves whether one of those two religions was meant to serve as the carrier of monotheism toward its universal triumph. The universal dimension of biblical monotheism and the realities of medieval history together added weight to the claim that God had replaced Israel with one of the two new universal faiths: Christianity or Islam.

Maimonides therefore cautioned his readers against confusing the universal triumph of monotheism with the abolition of Jewish particularity. The triumph of monotheism during the messianic era will not involve the abrogation of Israel's ancient covenant with God. On the contrary, Israel's national political restoration is a necessary condition for the realization of the messianic promise.

The choice of universality at the expense of Jewish particularity negates the messianic ideal. Maimonides cites Christianity as an example of this. While the failures of certain presumed messianic figures can be viewed positively, Maimonides singles out Jesus for condemnation because "he was instrumental in changing the Torah and causing the world to err and serve another beside God." A messianic ideal that is at the expense of Israel and its Torah is, claims Maimonides, fraudulent and destructive.

The second point Maimonides makes in this passage concerns the plausibility of the belief in the actualization of the messianic hope. It might appear that, given the conditions of medieval history, the messianic triumph of monotheism with Israel as its carrier would hence-

forth be impossible without the miraculous intervention of God. If that were the case, then how could one retain belief in messianism without reverting to fantasy or exaggerated miracle claims?

Maimonides therefore sought to provide an interpretation of history that would make messianism plausible without recourse to belief in miracles. His interpretation of the important roles played by Christianity and Islam in furthering the spread of monotheism makes the triumph of monotheism—and hence messianism—empirically plausible. Maimonides was thus able to safeguard his naturalistic conception of messianism. The triumphs of Christianity and Islam are not presented as proofs that history is governed according to a divine blueprint, but rather, in order to show that the messianic reality may be realized without any radical changes in the natural order of things.

The crux of Maimonides' argument is that the eventual triumph of Judaism is built into the conceptual fabrics of Christianity and Islam. Although they persecute Israel and claim that its weakness and vulnerability are proof of divine rejection, nevertheless they are conceptually within the framework of the Torah. By their own account, Israel was the precursor of the other monotheistic faiths. When a king emerges to restore Israel's sovereignty and change its historical condition from weakness and vulnerability to strength and self-reliance, the central argument against Israel's election will be demolished. A reborn Israel will constitute a compelling refutation of those religions insofar as they base their claims to authenticity on Israel's suffering. A nonsuffering Israel would force Christians and Muslims to rethink their respective theologies. And in revising their picture of Israel as the rejected people of God, they will feel impelled to acknowledge that Israel is the true carrier of the universal triumph of monotheism.

Maimonides' treatment of Christianity and Islam in "Kings and Wars" is not part of a general theory of history, but rather a *post facto* explanation of existing conditions. His argument was not meant to show that the emergence of these two religions was inevitable. Christianity and Islam are treated as given facts of history; they are introduced not to show that divine cunning operates in history, but rather to explain the connection between the restoration of Israel's sovereignty and the universal triumph of monotheism. Since the two religions have exposed vast numbers of people to the biblical world of concepts and ideas, they have created a plausible framework for Judaism's reemergence in history as the dominant monotheistic religion.<sup>44</sup>

Maimonides did not propound a theology of history in the *Mishneh Torah*.<sup>45</sup> This work is a comprehensive codification of law—a framework for organizing one's personal, family, and communal affairs according to the *mitzvot*. When discussing the purpose of the Jewish

people's national political restoration in messianic times, Maimonides strove to neutralize collective fantasy and religious triumphalism. In "Kings and Wars," as throughout the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides placed the ideal of knowledge and love of God at the center of halakhic life. Since the collective fantasies of national hegemony and supernaturalism were obstacles to developing a religious orientation based on that ideal, Maimonides sought to naturalize the community's conception of messianism and make love of God the focal point of its historical hopes and aspirations.

#### MESSIANISM IN THE EPISTLE TO YEMEN

We are now in a position to appreciate the striking differences between Maimonides' treatment of messianism in his other works and in the *Epistle to Yemen*. Above all, the latter totally ignores the instrumental interpretation of messianism expounded in *Ḥelek* and the *Mishneh Torah*. The theme of that interpretation was that messianism is not an end in itself, but a good desired insofar as it constitutes a set of socioeconomic conditions conducive to achieving the ultimate goal of Judaism: the world to come, which is attained through knowledge and love of God. Nothing of this is recalled in the epistle.

This difference can be characterized as follows: in those other works Maimonides used messianism to explain the meaning of Judaism, while in the *Epistle to Yemen* he used it to provide a community with hope. The focal point of his treatment of messianism in his legal works was what transpires *after* rather than *before* the coming of the Messiah. Since messianism in the epistle served as a category of hope, the events preceding and leading to the advent of the Messiah were deemed all-important. This is also why, conversely, the concept of the birth pangs of the Messiah is introduced in the epistle, though it is notably absent from his other works.

The problem facing Maimonides in the *Epistle to Yemen* was not materialism or disregard for the spiritual goals of Judaism, but a community sinking into despair and disillusionment because of its suffering. Messianism, therefore, was not introduced in order to draw the community's attention to the sublime purposes of Judaism, but simply to counteract hopelessness by interpreting suffering as evidence of approaching redemption.

The messianic figure as described in the *Epistle to Yemen* is not primarily a teacher who moves the nations of the world by virtue of his wisdom. He is a prophetic figure who crushes opposition by performing remarkable miracles. When Maimonides mentions the Messiah's wisdom, it is only in order to debunk the claims of messianic pretenders, i.e., to provide his readers with criteria for rejecting false



Messiahs. The picture of the true Messiah presented in the *Epistle to Yemen* preserves hope in the community by neutralizing the potentially disruptive effects of charismatic pretenders. Maimonides treats the Messiah as a weapon with which to fight false Messiahs, and by and large ignores the Messiah's positive role in awakening the community to love of God.

The community addressed in the *Epistle to Yemen* may be distinguished from the general audience of Maimonides' legal works by virtue of its suffering condition. A suffering community differs from a community of action. It perceives itself as a passive victim of external forces. When this sense of vulnerability grips a community, it loses confidence in its own ability to effect changes in its condition. Consequently, the motif of redemption through miracles recurs throughout the *Epistle to Yemen*. The Messiah, therefore, is primarily a performer of miracles. What is more, the epistle's picture of history is dominated by the principle of unilateral divine action. The notion of the *ketz*, the predetermined time of redemption, is a key notion in the epistle, for it makes redemption independent of the community's own efforts and deserts. Messianism is thus unrelated to human action or initiative; it is not a process that human beings can influence, but rather a preordained state of affairs that miraculously erupts in history according to a fixed divine scheme.

In "Kings and Wars," Maimonides' description of unsuccessful messianic "experiments" creates the impression that there can never be absolute certainty that the messianic age has come about. The example of Rabbi Akiva believing that Bar Kokhba was the Messiah shows that there are various stages in ascertaining whether the messianic era has commenced and that in fact failure is always a possibility. Because miracles play a minor role both in validating the credentials of the Messiah and in determining whether messianic conditions obtain, one can never be absolutely certain that what seem to be messianic conditions will endure. In addressing a community of action in the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides is less concerned with providing guarantees as to the final redemption than with pointing out the spiritual implications of the concept of messianism for a full appreciation of Judaism.

Maimonides, who fashions his philosophy of *mitzvot* on the basis of the imperative: "See, I set before you this day life and good, death and evil. . . . Choose life" (Deut. 30:15, 19), does not require a pre-deterministic view of history in order to sustain his religious commitment. The crucial belief that underlies his religious orientation is that human actions have significance because the *mitzvot* are eternally binding.

The aim of the *Epistle to Yemen* is to create hope and not necessarily

to influence action. Maimonides was content with gaining time by encouraging the community to persevere for an additional thirty to forty years. The figures he mentions for the duration of previous periods of persecution, such as fifty-two years, were short enough to encourage the community to "hold on" a little longer. Even the date of the predicted return of prophecy was close enough to inspire hope, yet distant enough to gain time to allow conditions to change.

The *Epistle to Yemen* was aimed at instilling within the community a capacity to wait without being disillusioned. The courage and tenacity required for such an historical attitude was to be nurtured by the vivid image of the covenant at Sinai. In order to withstand the challenges of its enemies, the community had to be convinced of its unique place in history. This victimized, suffering community would be able to bear its degradation if it could retain belief in its singularity in the eyes of God.

The treatment of Christianity and Islam in the *Epistle to Yemen* also answers to this fundamental need. In the *Mishneh Torah*, where the goal is to educate a community of action to strive to implement the values implicit in the messianic ideal, Christianity and Islam are placed in a relatively positive light. They are viewed as instruments serving the realization of messianism and, therefore, their ascendancy in history lends plausibility to the belief in the ultimate triumph of Judaism. The epistle, in contrast, seeks merely to denigrate them as vain schemes to undermine Judaism.

In the *Epistle to Yemen* the emphasis on action is absent. The theme of *teshuvah*, which encourages action and heightens a person's sense of responsibility,<sup>46</sup> is hardly mentioned. The logic here is not one that promises action, but rather one that explains suffering. The perspective on history conveyed in the epistle is centered on the unique and envied place of Israel in the divine scheme of history. The nations of the world, driven by resentment for not having been elected by God, try repeatedly to thwart the divine will.

This Israel-centered picture of history has particular significance for a suffering Jewish community. Because of his pain, the sufferer tends to focus on his personal needs and to assume a self-centered attitude to the world. Suffering may imprison a person within the limited circle of his subjective needs and interests. Maimonides therefore realized the pointlessness of speaking to a suffering community about such ideals as love and knowledge of God, i.e., about ideals that presuppose a person's ability to transcend egocentricity in order to appreciate that which has intrinsic worth. The sufferer is not open to hear the virtues of knowledge and worship of God for their own sakes.

Because of the traumatic and disillusioning events it was forced to

undergo, the community in Yemen was preoccupied with its own needs and interests. At this moment in time, its perception of history was no longer objective and dispassionate. The *Epistle to Yemen* reflects this suffering community's outlook on reality. Christianity and Islam, as seen through the eyes of the sufferer, have no positive significance; their sole objective is to subvert God's plan by destroying the people of Israel and Judaism. All of history reveals this conspiracy against Israel. Whether it be through the sword, sophistical arguments, or the invention of rival religions, the central preoccupation of the great nations of history is to weaken and destroy the people of Israel.

While a suffering community is not an active community, there is a danger of its being driven out of desperation to act impetuously and irrationally. Maimonides uses the text from the tractate Ketubbot concerning the oath not to rebel in anticipation of the advent of the Messiah to caution the community against translating hope into political action. This text, which reflects the traumatic aftermath of the Bar Kokhba uprising, does not appear in any of Maimonides' other writings. In chapter five of "Kings and Wars," Maimonides deals with themes contained in the section of Ketubbot where this text appears, yet he never once mentions the oath binding Israel to remain passive and not act to restore its political independence. On the contrary, in a later chapter of "Kings and Wars," he goes on, as we saw, to imply approval of Rabbi Akiva's decision to support Bar Kokhba.

In the *Epistle to Yemen* the community is told to bear its suffering with dignity. Its suffering is a burnt offering unto God; its heroic refusal to succumb to its enemies expresses the profound love of God described allegorically in the Song of Songs. Redemption is dissociated entirely from human initiative. It is guaranteed by a predetermined divine plan and the community's suffering is deemed to be a sure sign of its approach.

#### NECESSITY AND FREEDOM

A related difference between the *Epistle to Yemen* and Maimonides' legal writings is that the latter place a much greater stress on the extent of human freedom. Whereas the picture of history that dominates the epistle is necessitarian, the picture given in the legal writings is more action-oriented and open-ended.

To begin with, there are several places in his legal works where the belief in human freedom is made a cornerstone of the Torah and Halakhah. An example is the *Eight Chapters*.

If a man's actions were done under compulsion, the commandments and prohibitions of the Law would be nullified and they

would all be absolutely in vain, since man would have no choice in what he does. . . .

The truth about which there is no doubt is that all of man's actions are given over to him. If he wishes to act he does so, and if he does not wish to act he does not; there is no compulsion whatsoever upon him. Hence it necessarily follows that commands can be given.<sup>47</sup>

A theology that would negate the significance of human freedom would in turn undermine Halakhah. Consequently, in the *Eight Chapters* Maimonides interprets the rabbinic statement "Everything is in the hands of heaven except fear of heaven" in a way that emphasizes human freedom.<sup>48</sup> He expands the scope of "fear of heaven" to include all human actions and restricts the class of things "in the hands of heaven" to natural and biological conditions that are not subject to human choices. Thus "fear of heaven" includes all of human behavior and not only behavior governed explicitly by the commandments. Whereas the rabbinic statement in question seems to constrict the scope of human freedom by describing "fear of heaven" as the exception and "in the hands of God" as the rule, Maimonides packs all of human behavior into "fear of heaven" and thereby turns the statement into a rabbinic affirmation of free will.

There are, however, certain biblical texts that seem to contradict Maimonides' radical approach to human freedom. While the law presupposes an open universe which human beings can shape, certain biblical texts suggest a theology of history that is incompatible with this world view. God's revelation to Abraham that his descendants would be enslaved and oppressed (Gen. 15:13) is an example of "verses that lead people to fancy that God preordained and compels disobedience." If the enslavement in Egypt was preordained by God and if, consequently, the Egyptians necessarily oppressed Abraham's descendants, then God's punishment of the Egyptians not only violates our basic intuitions about justice, but also contradicts Maimonides' claim that freedom is a necessary presupposition of the Torah. According to Maimonides, a predictive, necessitarian theory of history would destroy the normative framework of the Sinai covenant.

Maimonides resolves this apparent contradiction in the Bible by arguing that none of the predictions mentioned in the Torah entailed the necessity of actions predicted.<sup>49</sup> No individual was compelled to act in a particular way as a result of any of these predictions. While they are expressed as unconditional statements about what will inevitably occur in the future, they are logically no different from correct predictions based upon the moral habits of human beings.

The answer is that this is like the Exalted saying that some people born in the future will be sinful, some will be obedient, some virtuous, and some bad. Now this is correct, but it does not necessarily follow from this statement that a given bad man is bad without fail, nor that a given virtuous man is virtuous without fail. Rather, whoever is bad is so by his own choice. If he wishes to be virtuous, he can be so; there is nothing preventing him. Similarly, if any virtuous man wishes to, he can be bad; there is nothing preventing him. The prediction is not about a particular individual, so that he could say: "It has been preordained for me." Rather, it is stated in a general way, and each individual remains able to exercise his choice upon his original inborn disposition. Similarly, if any individual Egyptian who oppressed them and treated them unjustly had not wanted to oppress them, he had choice about that; for it was not preordained that a given individual would oppress them.

This answer is the same as the answer to the problem posed by His saying: "Behold, you are about to sleep with your fathers, and this people will rise up and go astray after the foreign gods of the land." There is no difference between this and His saying: "Thus we shall act toward and deal with whoever worships idols." If there were never anyone who committed a transgression, then the threats, all of the curses, and likewise all of the punishments which are in the Law would be futile. The existence of the judgment of death by stoning in the Torah does not make us say that the man who profaned the Sabbath is compelled to profane it, nor do the curses force us to say that those idol worshipers upon whom the curses fell were preordained to idol worship. Rather, everyone who worshiped [idols] did so by choice and punishment befell him. "Just as they have chosen their ways . . . I too shall choose, etc."<sup>50</sup>

Maimonides lumps God's prediction to Abraham that Israel would be enslaved and oppressed in Egypt together with legal judgments conditional upon the violation of specific norms. Just as in the latter case there is no presumption that violations of the laws in question must occur necessarily, so too in the cases involving divine predictions there is no presumption that particular individuals must necessarily act in predetermined ways.

The crucial point of this argument is that predictive judgments concerning human behavior and divine predictions concerning the future course of history share a common logic. In neither case does necessity replace contingency. Regardless of the accuracy of the divine predictions related in the Torah, history remains within the domain of freedom and not "in the hands of heaven." Maimonides *qua* halakhist was



disturbed by biblical allusions to a divinely predetermined course of history;<sup>51</sup> he was repelled by any theology of history that reduces freedom to an illusion and undermines human effort and initiative.

In the light of his consistent opposition to any necessitarian theological doctrine, it is clear why Maimonides makes the redemption of Israel dependent upon *teshuvah* in *Hilkhot Teshuvah*. This part of the *Mishneh Torah* reveals the same approach to freedom as is reflected in the *Eight Chapters*. Since the primary focus of *teshuvah* is upon a person's freedom to effect meaningful changes in his life, Maimonides deals with various problematic biblical texts and ideas that prima facie contradict the belief in human freedom. For example, he discusses the biblical text concerning God's hardening pharaoh's heart and the general problem of whether divine foreknowledge implies necessity.<sup>52</sup> As in the *Eight Chapters*, Maimonides neutralizes the necessitarian implications of biblical predictive statements.

In addition to arguing against theological determinism, he presents a remarkably naturalistic interpretation of divine grace.

What is meant by David's utterance: *Good and upright is the Lord; therefore He will teach sinners in the way; He will guide the meek in judgment and will teach the meek His way* [Ps. 25:8]? It refers to the fact that God sent them prophets to teach them the ways of the Lord and bring them back in repentance; furthermore, that He endowed them with the capacity of learning and understanding. For it is characteristic of every human being that, when his interest is engaged in the ways of wisdom and righteousness, he longs for these ways and is eager to follow them. Thus the sages say: "Whoever comes to purify himself receives aid"; that is, he will find himself helped in his endeavor. (*MT Hilkhot Teshuvah* 6:10)

The aid one receives when praying for divine grace consists in one's inclination to proceed along the paths of righteousness and wisdom after having become engaged in these pursuits. Divine grace is implicit in human rationality and in the joy derived from intellectual and moral activities. Grace is not a supernatural act of divine beneficence that delivers a person from responsibility for his condition. Grace is not antithetical to human freedom, but rather is expressed in the free unfolding of a person's rational nature. This is perhaps the most revealing statement of a philosopher-halakhist opposed to any theology that would minimize the importance of human freedom and initiative in a person's encounter with God.

Very different is the approach of the *Epistle to Yemen*. Here Maimonides emphasizes the necessitarian aspects of God's involvement in

human history. In contrast to the approach in his legal writings, he makes repeated references to biblical predictions and allusions to the unalterable course of events in order to convey a necessitarian picture of history. The difference of approach is also evident in his discussion of astrology.<sup>53</sup>

Maimonides viewed astrology as a pseudoscience whose "postulates can be refuted by real proofs on rational grounds." The most disturbing aspect of astrology was not its falsity but the harm that belief in it could cause to the community. For one thing, astrologers predicted that Israel would never be redeemed.

This is how matters stand regarding the era of the Messiah, may he speedily come. For while the gentiles believe that our nation will never constitute an independent state, nor will it ever rise above its present condition, and all the astrologers, diviners, and augurs concur in this opinion, God will prove their views and beliefs false, and will order the advent of the Messiah. (p. 117)

Without going into a discussion of the rational proofs that show astrology to be a pseudoscience, Maimonides cites authoritative texts as evidence for the unreliability of astrological predictions.

. . . Mark well, however, what Scripture has to say about the astrologers. At the time when Moses rose to leadership, the astrologers had unanimously predicted that our nation would never be freed from bondage, nor gain its independence. But fortune smiled upon Israel, for the most exquisite of human beings appeared and redeemed them at the very time that was supposedly most inauspicious for them. Furthermore, Egypt was smitten with the plagues at the very time for which the astrologers had foretold an epoch of wholesome climate, abundance, and prosperity for the inhabitants. . . . Similarly, the pundits, astrologers, and prognosticators were all of one mind that the administration of Nebuchadnezzar the wicked marked the beginning of an era of enduring prosperity. Forsooth, his dynasty was extinguished and destroyed, as was divinely forecast by Isaiah. (pp. 116-117)

Maimonides' main attack on astrology centers on the incompatibility of believing in a moral Judge of history and believing that events on earth are causally determined by planetary or stellar configurations. While the Torah explains the Flood and the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah in terms of the wickedness of the generations in question, the astrologers insist that these events were the result of amoral causes.

. . . So whatever happens in this world that has its source in God, they say it is the inescapable consequences of planetary conjunctions.

They have affirmed the truth of their propositions in order to undermine the principles of our religion, and to give free rein to their animal instincts and passions as do the beasts and the ostriches. (p. 120)

Maimonides then cites a passage from Leviticus, which he repeats in the *Guide*, in the *Mishneh Torah*'s "Laws of Fasting," and in the *Letter to the Rabbis of Marseilles on Astrology*:

. . . We have been admonished by God against those views in Scripture to the following effect: "If you rebel against Me so that I bring disaster upon you as a punishment of your misdeeds, but you ascribe your reverses to chance rather than to your guilt, I shall increase your afflictions and make them more grievous." This is the intent of His words in the Chapter of Admonitions: *If you remain be-keri toward Me, I too will remain be-keri to you* [Lev. 26:27-28]. Now *keri* signifies chance, hazard. It means to say: "If you regard My chastisement as a fortuitous event, I shall bring the most severe calamities upon you, *sevenfold for your sins*" [Lev. 26:21]. These foregoing remarks have made it abundantly clear that the advent of the Messiah is in no way subject to the influence of the stars. (p. 120)

What Maimonides fails to mention here is that Israel's destiny is determined by *teshuvah*, i.e., the observance of the commandments. In his legal works, his attack on astrology is aimed at fortifying belief in the efficacy of human action; astrology has to be refuted because Judaism affirms human freedom and the ability to effect changes both individually and collectively through moral action. In contrast, the themes of *teshuvah* and human freedom are notably absent from the *Epistle to Yemen*. Here his discussion of astrology is motivated by the need to show that the "advent of the Messiah is in no way subject to the influence of the stars." Astrology is attacked primarily because it creates disillusionment and despair in the community. Maimonides assails the belief in astrology in order to safeguard belief in the divine promise to redeem Israel at the preordained time. The crucial conflict of beliefs is not between necessitarian astrology and human freedom, but rather between a necessitarian conception of history implied by astrology and a necessitarian conception of history based on the biblical promises.

Astrology is viewed as a rival to the Jewish belief in the inevitable coming of the Messiah. It is an enemy of hope. Even when Jews use

astrology to prove the coming of the Messiah at a particular time, the results are disastrous for invariably these prognostications fail to materialize. Nevertheless, people fall victim to such "extravagances, for a drowning man catches at a straw." The epistle is addressed to such drowning people. It is pointless to tell a drowning person to trust in his ability to alter his environment through moral action. When a person's world seems to be collapsing, he turns outward in search of redemption. In the epistle, redemption is not a challenge but a promise. Belief in historical necessity is a source of comfort and hope.

The *Epistle to Yemen* thus differs from the bulk of Maimonides' legal writings also by virtue of its emphasis on necessity rather than on freedom. In it Maimonides chose the way of the concerned and compassionate leader. Rather than preach the need for *teshuvah* and disinterested worship of God, Maimonides responded to the community in terms of its particular needs. He did not attempt to destroy its fantasies or to point out its weaknesses.

The compassionate leader does not focus on the meaning of messianism in terms of the ideals of love and knowledge of God when the community he addresses is being brutalized. His primary goal is to fortify its will to survive. Rather than picture messianism in terms of the universal triumph of monotheism, he talks of a universal conspiracy against God because of His election of Israel. In the *Epistle to Yemen*, Maimonides provides the lonely and distraught sufferer with a theology of grace. He addresses the confused and frightened victim who feels drawn toward charismatics and false messiahs—who catches at straws—and tries to provide him with the strength to persevere in heroic silence in his belief in and commitment to Judaism.

In the *Mishneh Torah*, Maimonides argues for the uniqueness and inviolability of Mosaic prophecy in order to support the belief in the eternity of the commandments. In the *Epistle to Yemen*, however, these notions are used to give meaning to the community's suffering and degradation. By establishing the eternal validity of Mosaic prophecy in the epistle, Maimonides provides the framework wherein the community can perceive its anguish and pain as expressions of an all-consuming love for God. The focal point of the *Mishneh Torah* is the meaningfulness of human action; the focal point of the *Epistle to Yemen* is the meaningfulness of suffering.

The person who feels powerless to act is comforted and strengthened by a vision of history dominated by necessity. Maimonides turns to a community that is trapped within its own terrors and feeling of futility and he tells them: I have a tradition from my father, who received it from his father, that prophecy will be restored in the near future and we shall then witness the promised triumph of Judaism. Necessity is

the message of hope for a person who has lost faith in his ability to act.

## NOTES

1. See BT Kiddushin 39b, Yoma 69b, Gittin 56b. Also D. Hartman, *Joy and Responsibility* (Jerusalem: Ben Zvi-Posner, 1978), pp. 1-4, 181-87, 225-28.

2. See D. Hartman, *Maimonides: Torah and Philosophic Quest* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1976), p. 246, n. 10; p. 261, n. 39.

3. See D. Hartman, "The Joy of Torah," and "Halakhah as a Ground for Creating a Shared Spiritual Language," in *Joy and Responsibility*, pp. 28-29, 150-54.

4. See L. Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (Glencoe, Ill.: The Free Press, 1952), Chapter 2; and D. Hartman, *Maimonides*, Chapter 1. According to Strauss, the importance of considering audiences grows out of the philosopher's quest to survive in a world that feels threatened by the philosopher (e.g., Socrates). Our concern with audiences in Maimonides' writings focuses on the logic of the educator who speaks only after he understands his audience. See Maimonides' description of the logic of the educator in his introduction to *Helek* and in the *Guide* 3:32; and in the discussion of the *Essay on Resurrection* in this volume.

5. See the introduction to A. S. Halkin's edition of *Moses Maimonides' Epistle to Yemen*, trans. B. Cohen (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1952), pp. xiii-xxi; M. Perlmann, "The Medieval Polemics between Islam and Judaism," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), pp. 103-38.

6. See I. Twersky, *Introduction to the Code of Maimonides (Mishneh Torah)* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1980), pp. 380-87; Y. Ben-Sasson, "Le-ḥeker mishnat ta'amei mitzvot," *Tarbiz* 29 (1960): 268-82. Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik follows in the spirit of Maimonides with his psychological and existential interpretation of *mitzvot*. The universal dimensions of the human condition serve as the ground upon which he explicates his philosophy of Judaism. Yeshayahu Leibowitz, though influenced by Maimonides, considers this aspect of Maimonides as a preliminary stage in one's religious growth (*she-lo li-shmah*), which should be superseded by an approach to *mitzvot* that has no bearing upon the human condition. See Y. Leibowitz, *The Faith of Maimonides* (Hebrew) (Tel Aviv: Ministry of Defense, 1980), pp. 78-85.

7. In *Guide* 2:33, Maimonides is somewhat embarrassed by the biblical account of the collective nature of revelation because it conflicts with his treatment of the intellectual and moral qualities necessary for prophecy. Compare Maimonides' exegesis of Joel 3:1 at the end of this epistle and in *Guide* 2:32.

8. BT Nedarim 20a. See BT Yevamot 79a; *MT Hilkhhot Issurei Bi'ah* 12:24, 19:17, *Hilkhhot Teshuvah* 2:10, *Hilkhhot Avadim* 8:9. These halakhot are interesting examples of the integration of Aggadah and Halakhah. It is also



important to distinguish between a normative use of the character traits of the covenantal Jew and Judah Halevi's understanding of Israel's unique spiritual talents. For Maimonides the description of character traits serves a moral purpose; it does not endow the community with unique spiritual and intellectual powers. Unlike Judah Halevi, Maimonides does not restrict the spiritual capacity to achieve prophecy to Jews. See Hartman, *Maimonides*, p. 267, n. 73.

9. See Hartman, *Maimonides*, pp. 105–9; *MT Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 8:2.

10. See *MT Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 8; Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 1:87, 4:11; Halkin, ed., *Epistle to Yemen*, pp. xix–xx.

11. See D. Hartman, "Maimonides' Approach to Messianism and Its Contemporary Implications," *Daat* 2–3(1978–79): 5–33.

12. See *MT Hilkhoh Teshuvah* 10:5; *Guide* 3:51, 54; G. D. Cohen, "The Song of Songs and the Jewish Religious Mentality," in *The Samuel Friedland Lectures 1960–61* (New York: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1966), pp. 1–21; Hartman, *Maimonides*, p. 52.

13. See *Commentary to the Mishnah*, trans. J. Kafih (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook, 1963–68), Intro., p. 4; *MT Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 8:1.

14. See BT *Shevu'ot* 39a.

15. See Halkin, ed., *Epistle to Yemen*, p. 22, n. 26. There is an interesting connection between the following facts: the persecution of the community in Yemen began around 1165; the return of prophecy, according to Maimonides' extraordinary tradition, was to begin around 1210 or 1216; and Maimonides' claim that the persecution during the Second Jewish Commonwealth lasted fifty-two years.

16. See A. J. Heschel, "Ha-he'emin ha-Rambam she-zakhah la-nevu'ah?" in *Louis Ginzberg Jubilee Volume*, ed. A. Marx et al. (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1945), Hebrew section, pp. 159–88. Heschel claims that Maimonides seriously believed in this tradition. For Heschel, this fact adds weight to his overall thesis concerning Maimonides' striving for prophecy. See G. D. Cohen's Leo Baeck memorial lecture, *Messianic Postures of Ashkenazim and Sephardim* (New York: Leo Baeck Institute, 1967), pp. 22–29. Cohen's attempt to link the messianic speculations of Sephardic thinkers such as Maimonides with the "rationalism, science, philosophy, and Hebrew classicism that were the hallmarks of this group" (p. 22) is farfetched. He claims:

Hence, they would have little truck with apocalyptic fantasy. Accordingly, it is not surprising to discern in their writings an effort to calculate the end by the movements of the stars or by rhythmic periodizations of history. Having been trained in philosophy, they regarded the universe and human history as mechanisms or organisms, the functioning of which had been committed by the Creator to immutable laws. Built into these mechanisms as part of the law of their operation they postulated laws of time which would—in the fullness of time—catapult the elect segment of the cosmos—indeed, the world at large—into a happier and more harmonious course. Since it was all a question of a particular

manifestation of the laws of nature, fixed by God, to be sure, but capable of rational analysis nonetheless, if one could but permeate the complex secrets of the essential part of the machine or organism, one could determine when its course would change.

Cohen's interpretation of Judah Halevi's departure for Palestine as "not a logical conclusion of Andalusian messianism but a total rejection of it" (p. 24) is similarly unconvincing. In the light of what has been shown in this essay concerning Maimonides' rejection of the doctrine of a fixed, predetermined scheme of history, Cohen's argument is highly implausible.

Halkin describes Maimonides' extraordinary tradition as one that negates present delusions without destroying hope for the future (*Epistle to Yemen*, p. xiii), but this view does not necessarily reflect Maimonides' personal beliefs. Maimonides' exoneration of Saadiah may be viewed as a veiled justification of his own decision to engage in speculation concerning the return of prophecy and by implication, the commencement of the messianic era.

17. A. Funkenstein, "Maimonides' Political Theory and Realistic Messianism," in *Miscellanea Mediaevalia* 11 (1977): 81–103.

18. *Ibid.*, p. 84, n. 10.

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 98–100. See the analysis of *Guide* 3:32 in the discussion of the *Essay on Resurrection* in this volume.

20. Funkenstein, "Maimonides Political Theory," pp. 92–93.

21. The imminent necessity for the Absolute Spirit to realize itself in history, which is the lifeblood of Hegel's notion of the cunning of reason, has no basis in Maimonidean thought. There is no inner compulsion for the monotheistic idea to be realized in history. The triumph of monotheism is a normative ideal for the complete realization of Torah in the life of the community and not a dialectical force working itself out in history. The model for understanding the divine patience and use of ruse is, as S. Pines has shown, nature and not history. Pines, in introducing his translation of the *Guide of the Perplexed* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963) by no means equates Hegel with Maimonides; he simply points out that Maimonides' use of the expression *talattuf* "calls to mind Hegel's expression: 'the ruse of reason'—'List der Vernunft.'"

For Maimonides, the normative ideal of history—knowledge and love of God—is in principle realizable for individuals outside of a messianic society; see G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea in Judaism* (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 25. It is for this reason that messianism does not play a central role in the *Guide of the Perplexed*. Even in the *Mishneh Torah*, *olam ha-ba* (an ahistorical category) is the culmination of the religious aspiration.

Maimonides' opening statement in *MT Hilkhhot Yesodei ha-Torah* is totally incompatible with Hegel's theology and undermines the dynamic necessitarian picture of history behind Hegel's philosophy of history.

The basic principle of all basic principles and the pillar of all sciences is to realize that there is a First Being who brought every existing thing into being. All existing things, whether celestial, terrestrial, or belonging to an intermediate class, exist only through His true existence.

If it could be supposed that He did not exist, it would follow that nothing else could possibly exist.

If, however, it were supposed that all other beings were nonexistent, He alone would still exist. Their nonexistence would not involve His nonexistence. For all beings are in need of Him; but He, blessed be He, is not in need of them nor of any one of them. Hence, His real essence is unlike that of any of them. (*MT Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 1:1-3)

It is worthwhile comparing Maimonides' treatment of the problem of evil and human suffering in the *Guide* 3:17-24 with Hegel's necessitarian conception of history that serves as a rational theodicy. Not only is there a radical difference in their theologies, but there are crucial differences in their anthropologies. A person who philosophizes in the spirit of Maimonides moves from history to nature and finally realizes his own insignificance and the radical difference between divine and human knowledge (see *MT Hilkhoh Yesodei ha-Torah* 2:2). As distinct from Hegel's anthropology, Maimonidean man never oversteps the bounds of finitude. On the contrary, it is the philosopher who is filled with awe and humility when he fully understands his finitude in relationship to God's infinity. Also, Maimonidean man never discovers the necessity of suffering, but only ways of transcending its paralyzing effects (*Guide* 3:24).

In any discussion of Maimonides' philosophy of history, and specifically regarding the notion of progress in history, one should bear in mind the parenthetical remark in his chapter on the Sabeian background of biblical culture (*Guide* 3:29):

If the belief in the existence of the deity were not generally accepted at present to such an extent in the religious communities, our days in these times would be even darker than that epoch. However, their darkness is of different kinds.

As a believing Jew who took Halakhah and the community seriously, Maimonides surely believed in messianism and in the importance of the fulfillment of the prophetic promise of the eradication of idolatry in history. This is a far cry from claiming that he believed, like Hegel, that he could penetrate into the secrets of the divine mind and decipher the strange and mysterious workings of the divine cunning in history.

See G. Scholem, *The Messianic Idea*, pp. 24-33; S. Avineri, *Hegel's Theory of the Modern State* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), pp. 230-34; C. Taylor, *Hegel and Modern Society* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp. 37-38, 95-100; R. Tucker, *Philosophy and Myth in Karl Marx* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1961), pp. 45-56; W. Kaufmann, *Hegel: A Reinterpretation* (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor, 1966), pp. 249-75; E. Fackenheim, *The Religious Dimension in Hegel's Thought* (Boston: Beacon, 1967), pp. 116-59.

22. See *Guide* 2:27-29 regarding the question of an end to history; *Guide* 2:48, regarding how causality mediates the will of God; and Hartman, "Maimonides' Approach to Messianism," pp. 9-24.

23. Introduction to *Helek*, trans. J. Abelson in his “Maimonides on the Jewish Creed,” *Jewish Quarterly Review* 19(1906–7): 29.

24. *Ibid.*, pp. 29, 30.

25. *Ibid.*, p. 40.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 44.

28. *Ibid.*, p. 42.

29. *Ibid.*, pp. 42–43.

30. Scholem, “Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism,” in *The Messianic Idea*, p. 31. Rabbi J. B. Soloveitchik makes the point that since, according to Maimonides, historical redemption depends upon Israel’s freely choosing to do *teshuvah*, absolute certainty regarding messianism requires a dogmatic belief in the eternal spiritual power of Israel that will one day express itself in the redemptive act of *teshuvah*. According to Soloveitchik, one cannot believe in messianism without believing in Israel. See J. B. Soloveitchik, *On Repentance*, ed. P.H. Peli (Jerusalem: Orot, 1980), pp. 132–36.

For an analysis of the talmudic discussion on the relationship between redemption and repentance, see E. E. Urbach, *The Sages: Their Concepts and Beliefs* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1975), pp. 668–73, and “Redemption and Repentance in Talmudic Judaism,” in *Types of Redemption*, ed. Z. Werblowsky and J. Blecker (Leiden: Brill, 1970), pp. 190–206.

31. See “Kings and Wars” 2:6, 3:3. Note how 3:8 and 3:9 balance each other and how the tenth Halakhah of chapter 4 balances the rest of that chapter. For further halakhic examples of how Maimonides attempts to mitigate the misuse of authority and power, see *MT Hilkhot Sanhedrin* 24:4–10, 25:1–2. See Twersky, *Code of Maimonides*, pp. 271–72.

For the way the pursuit of philosophic knowledge of God can act as a corrective against the corrupting influence of power, see *Guide* 2:36 and compare with Plato, *Republic* 520–21a. Also see Hartman, *Maimonides*, pp. 197–200.

32. See R. Lerner, “Moses Maimonides,” in *History of Political Philosophy*, ed. L. Strauss and J. Cropsey (Chicago: Rand McNally, 1963), p. 217.

33. See “Kings and Wars” 6:1,4, and the comments of Rabad.

34. “Kings and Wars” 8:10.

35. Cf. “Kings and Wars” 9:1; *Commentary to the Mishnah*, *Hullin* 7:6; *Guide* 2:39. Note the repeated references to the biblical patriarchs as educators rather than as legislators in *MT Hilkhot Avodah Zarah* 1. See S. Atlas, *Pathways in Jewish Law* (Hebrew) (New York: American Academy for Jewish Research, 1978), pp. 23–30. Also S. S. Schwarzschild, “Do Noachites Have to Believe in Revelation?” *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 72 (1962): 297–365; Spinoza’s *Theologico-Political Treatise*, trans. R. H. M. Elwes (New York: Dover, 1951), p. 80, and L. Strauss, *Spinoza’s Critique of Religion* (New York: Schocken, 1965), pp. 23, 273, n. 58; Hartman, *Maimonides*, p. 222, n. 62.

36. See *Guide* 3:11.

37. See S. Pines, “Histabrut ha-tekumah me-ḥadash shel medinah yehudit

le-fi Yoseph ibn Kaspi u-le-fi Spinoza," in *Studies in the History of Jewish Philosophy* (Hebrew) (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute, 1977), p. 294; also Hartman, *Maimonides*, p. 249, nn. 33–35.

38. Cf. A. M. Hershman, "Textual Problems of Book Fourteen of the *Mishneh Torah*," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 40 (1950): 401–12.

It can be readily seen that the "general principle" enunciated in this section has no bearing on what precedes it. The first part of the section rejects the popular notion that the Messiah will be endowed with superhuman gifts which will enable him to perform signs and wonders; the second part stresses belief in the immutability of the Law. There is obviously a missing link between the two parts. (p. 410)

Hershman suggests that "the general principle" of the immutability of the Law originally must have followed the expurgated passage concerning Jesus of Nazareth and the roles of Christianity and Islam quoted further on in this essay. In the light of the logical connection between Maimonides' conceptions of messianism and of the purpose of the Law, as explained in this essay, section 11:3 is perfectly coherent and thus Hershman's reconstruction is unnecessary.

39. *The Code of Maimonides, Book Fourteen: The Book of Judges*, trans. A. M. Hershman, Yale Judaica Series, vol. 3 (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1949), p. xxiii.

40. Maimonides counters those who would argue that such a radical approach to human freedom is more in keeping with a secular than a religious conception of the world, by arguing that one ought to ascribe religious significance to the fixed structures of nature and not only to miraclelike interventions. One need not picture natural regularities as the cumulative effect of innumerable particular divine acts. Just as it is pointless to speak of particular divine volitions to account for an object's falling to the earth as the result of the force of gravity, so too it is pointless to speak of particular divine volitions to account for each and every act of human freedom. Every occurrence of the law of gravity expresses divine will only insofar as God is the Creator of the universe; thus He is the ultimate cause of all the forces and laws found in nature.

Similarly, Maimonides argues that divine will is expressed in voluntary human actions because free will is part of the very nature of a human being. Freedom is an essential condition of human nature and therefore every voluntary act may be regarded as an expression of divine will simply by virtue of its being an act of free will. In this respect, human freedom and divine will coincide. See *Eight Chapters*, chapter 8; *MT Hilkhhot Teshuvah* 5 (especially 5:4); *Guide* 2:48. For an understanding of the religious sensibility of the halakhist who conceives of divine action in this way, see Hartman, *Maimonides*, chapter 4.

41. *The Book of Judges*, trans. A. M. Hershman, pp. xxiii–xxiv.

42. See *Responsa of Maimonides*, ed. J. Blau, 3 vols, (Jerusalem: Mekitze Nirdamin, 1957–61), Resp. 149, 448; *MT Hilkhhot Avodah Zarah* 9:4, text as in *Sefer ha-Mada*, ed. S. Lieberman (Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kook,



1964); *MT Hilkhhot Ma'akhalot Assurot* 11:7; H. A. Wolfson, "Maimonides on the Unity and Incorporeality of God," *Jewish Quarterly Review*, n.s. 56 (1965): 112–36; Pines, "Histabrut ha-tekumah me-hadash," p. 292, n. 16; J. Katz, *Exclusiveness and Tolerance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961), ch. 10; H. H. Ben-Sasson, "Jewish Reflections on Nationhood in the Twelfth Century," *P'raqim* 2 (1969–74): 178–95.

43. See *Guide* 3:17.

44. See Judah Halevi, *Kuzari* 4:11–23; Ben-Sasson, "Jewish Reflections on Nationhood," pp. 181–83. Ben-Sasson's attempt at integrating Maimonides' overall appreciation of reason, choice, and freedom with his attitude toward Christianity and Islam as instruments serving the ideal of messianism warrants serious consideration. Funkenstein's position was greatly influenced by Ben-Sasson's. See Twersky, *The Code of Maimonides*, pp. 452–53.

45. Cf. Twersky, *The Code of Maimonides*, pp. 225–28; L. Kaplan, "Maimonides on the Singularity of the Jewish People" (unpublished); Funkenstein, "Maimonides," pp. 98–9.

In contrast to those who treat the first chapter of *MT Hilkhhot Avodah Zarah* as the initial stage of a historical process culminating in messianism (i.e., as a chapter in Maimonides' philosophy of history), Maimonides' construction of the transition from monotheism to paganism, and the transition from Abraham's community of faith based on knowledge to Moses' covenantal community based on *mitzvah* can also be construed as an introduction to the laws of idolatry. The first chapter provides an explanation of why Judaism rejects mediative or intermediary worship regardless of whether the worshippers' belief framework is monotheistic. In showing how the loss of monotheism was caused by mistaken forms of worship (a halakhic rather than a philosophic error; see *Guide* 1:36), Maimonides enables the reader to appreciate Judaism's serious preoccupation with how one worships God.

Furthermore, the first chapter deals not only with the transition from monotheism to paganism and Abraham's struggle to reestablish monotheism, but also with the failure of Abraham's efforts once the community of faith based on knowledge was exposed to the cultural influences of Egypt. Maimonides shows that only a remnant, i.e., the tribe of Levi, could survive as monotheists without some counterpart to the disciplined structure of idolatry. Only through the efforts of Moses was Israel able to realize the monotheistic ideal. (Note the analogy Maimonides draws between the tribe of Levi and singular individuals who worship God on the basis of philosophic knowledge at the end of *MT Hilkhhot Shemitah ve-Yovel*.)

Maimonides' chapters on Abraham and on messianism serve normative and educational purposes; they are not meant to convey a philosophy of history culminating in the eschatological triumph of Judaism in the messianic era. The notion of an imminent, necessary process in history is foreign to Maimonidean thinking. Messianism is a guiding normative ideal of the community and not a prediction of an inevitable process. See Hartman, *Maimonides*, pp. 54–61, and Hartman, "The God of Abraham and the God of the Philosophers," in *Joy and Responsibility*, pp. 162–97.

46. See *Guide* 3:36 and *MT Hilkhhot Ta'anit* 1:1-3.

47. *Eight Chapters*, in *Ethical Writings of Maimonides*, trans. R. L. Weiss with C. E. Butterworth (New York: New York University Press, 1975), pp. 84-5.

48. See BT Niddah 16b (the comments of Rashi and Tosafot are far removed from Maimonides' interpretation); BT Megillah 25a; BT Berakhot 33b; *Responsa*, ed. Blau, Resp. 436, pp. 714-16.

49. Cf. the comments of Nahmanides to Gen. 15:13. See G. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. J. H. Marks (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961) on this verse.

50. *Eight Chapters*, pp. 88-9.

51. See A. Altmann, "The Religion of the Thinkers: Free Will and Predestination in Saadia, Bahya, and Maimonides," in *Religion in a Religious Age*, ed. S. D. Goitein (Cambridge, Mass.: Association for Jewish Studies, 1974), pp. 35-45; L. Strauss, "Notes on Maimonides' Book of Knowledge," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion Presented to Gershom G. Scholem* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967), pp. 280-83.

52. See the comments of Rabad to *MT Hilkhhot Teshuvah* 5; I. Twersky, *Rabad of Posquières* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962), pp. 280-81. For contemporary discussions on determinism and freedom, see P. F. Strawson, "Freedom and Resentment," in *Freedom and Resentment and Other Essays* (London: Methuen, 1974), pp. 1-25; I. Berlin, "Historical Inevitability," in *Four Essays on Liberty* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 41-117, and Berlin's interesting discussion with his critics in the introduction, pp. ix-xxxvii.

It would be fruitful to compare Maimonides' comments on coercion and freedom in *MT Hilkhhot Gerushin* 2:20 with Berlin's distinction between positive and negative freedom in his essay, "Two Concepts of Liberty."

53. See "The Correspondence between the Rabbis of Southern France and Maimonides about Astrology," ed. A. Marx, *Hebrew Union College Annual* 3 (1926): 311-58; Halkin, ed., *Epistle to Yemen*, pp. xxi-xxvi.